Infinity Claws

Star Cat - 1

Andrew Mackay

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Annotation

Enter your cat. Win the contest. Save the universe. Five-year-old Jamie Anderson has something to prove. He knows his cat, Jelly, is one in a million and has what it takes to win. In 2117, the search is on for the first feline in space. Welcome to the Star Cat Trials. Millions of cats across the globe will compete to demonstrate their agility, prowess, obedience and combat skills. The winner will join USARIC's Space Opera Beta team of mercenaries and scientists on a mission to Saturn to decode a distress call and rescue their sister ship. Now, the fur is about to fly. If Jelly wins, she'll soon learn that in space no one can hear you purr… Scroll up and claw the buy now button right now. Be one of the first humans to love clean feline space opera – an exciting new genre. Also on Kindle Unlimited. Star Cat: Pink Symphony (Book Two) – June 8th, 2018.

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STAR CAT

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Enjoy the book!

CHAPTER ONE

USARIC Data Point
IMS – International Moon Station
Year: 2116

"Good morning, Tripp."

"Good morning, Manuel."

Tripp Healy sipped his cup of coffee and glanced at his reflection in the glass panel. He hadn't shaved for a couple of days. Tired and cranky, he felt twenty years older than he was, which would have made him sixty years-old. He certainly felt like a much older man today.

Personal hygiene wasn't the first thing on his mind this morning, however. He had an important call to make to his family.

The only thing stopping him from dashing to the N-Gage terminal in his quarters was the spectacular view of Earth. The two-day travel back home wouldn't be undertaken for another two months.

Tripp had been on the moon for two weeks. Fatigue and homesickness were setting in. He found his work was stressful and maddening. USARIC had made little progress since receiving what they called a "cry" from Saturn one month ago to the day.

"Patch me into N-Gage, Manuel," Tripp made his way to the seat at his terminal. "Let's get this done."

"Yes, of course."

Tripp sat into his chair and looked at the black screen. His five o'clock shadow didn't improve, no matter which reflective surface he saw himself in.

The screen fizzed and switched on.

"Would you like visual or audio interface, Tripp?"

Manuel's voice came from somewhere. The great unwashed would have sworn blind that they were hearing things. There were no speakers in the room. The screen itself, ultra-thin and flat, wasn't producing any audio.

"Both, please," Tripp made himself comfortable in his seat. "They're used to me looking like a dog's dinner."

"Most amusing, Tripp," came the dulcet response from thin air.

Tripp rolled his shoulders and ironed out the crick in his neck. He placed his cup of coffee on the desk and pressed his hands together, awaiting the call.

N-Gage
Healy Residence
Dialing…

A two-tone noise bubbled from the screen as a green loading panel stretched across the screen.

"Dialing now, Tripp."

"Thanks, Manuel."

Somebody answered the call and appeared on screen. A fingertip obscured a face and environs behind it.

"Tripp, sweetie?"

"Yes, it's me," he said, "Samantha? Move your finger, honey."

"Oh, sorry. The answer panel is in a weird place." She moved her finger away to reveal her face.

Much like her husband, she'd just woken up. Her hair was unwashed and the absence of makeup reminded Tripp of the girl he knew all-too-well.

"Hey."

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Wanna see something cool?"

Samantha smiled and looked off-camera for a nanosecond. "Sure."

Tripp waved his hand in front of the screen. It turned forty-five degrees toward the window. Planet Earth loomed in the distance. A clear day back on the planet with only a smattering of clouds.

Samantha peered into the screen. The wonder of the view registered on her brow. "Wow, that's *amaziant*."

"Yes, if you look closer, you can see the outline of North America. Look."

He looked at the screen and aimed his finger along the border of Texas and Mexico.

"Oh, yes,' she said, "It's very pretty."

"Isn't it?"

"Rogan, quick," she beckoned someone from off-camera, "Come and see what Dad's showing us."

A five-year-old boy ran over to her and climbed onto her lap. "What is it?"

"Come and see the view from Daddy's bedroom on the moon."

Rogan's dropped when he realized what he was viewing. "Wow."

"*Incrediful*, isn't it?"

Tripp took the time to absorb his son's reaction. It was a face he longed to touch again. Those brilliantly blue eyes and angelic face.

"That's you, right there," Tripp held out his finger and traced the outline of land. "Wave to me."

Rogan opened his palm and waved.

His father returned the sentiment. Too far, of course, to see any detail. It was the thought that meant the world to both of them.

"You can't see me, Rogan, but I know you're there."

"When can I come with you to the moon, Daddy?"

“Maybe when you’re older,” Tripp traced the outline of his son’s face. “I miss you and mum.”

“We miss you, too. When are you coming back?”

“Soon. A couple weeks, I think.”

Samantha looked over her shoulder. A black cat walked across the floor in the background.

“Hey, Spooky,” Tripp said as it poked around the furniture and dug its claws into the carpet.

“No, don’t do that,” Samantha said, stomping her foot to the ground in an effort to curtail the damage the cat was doing to the carpet. “Bad girl.”

Tripp chuckled to himself. “We need to get her a post or something.”

‘She’s been behaving strangely,’ Samantha returned to the screen and hugged her son. ‘Ever since you left, she doesn’t know what to do with herself.’

“That’s very flattering,” Tripp smirked. “I’m sure she’ll figure something out.”

“How’s everything going up there?”

Tripp sighed and leaned back in his chair. He looked at his electric guitar which leaned against his desk.

“Not great.”

Samantha tried for an encouraging smile. “You look like hell.”

“I know, I’ve seen myself twice already today.” He folded his arms and tucked his chin on his neck. He felt somewhat sorry for himself.

Tripp snapped his finger. A holographic book, about five by eight inches big, appeared a few inches from his hand and flipped its pages. “We’re at a total loss. It’s all utterly meaningless.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. Opera Alpha is dead. Nothing, zip. Communication is completely cut off.”

“Still nothing?”

“No.”

“It’s been two weeks, now.”

Tripp looked out of the window. The planet spun slowly around, making its way out of view at the top of the window.

“The Saturn Cry transmission is ongoing.”

“Saturn Cry…” The holographic tome flipped through its pages and nestled in Tripp’s open palm.

“No, Manuel, I didn’t mean—”

Manuel ignored the request and launched into its description. “—Saturn Cry is a perceived distress call from the planet of the same name—”

“—Manuel, I know what Saturn Cry is, please stop—”

“—IMS discovered the transmission in the year 2110,” Manuel continued, flipping through his pages. He settled on a graphic of the ringed planet. The stars shuffled around in the background as the audio wave rumbled away. “Here is a sample of the transmission.”

A hissing noise emitted, followed by what sounded like three chords of an electric guitar.

“Manuel, hush.”

Samantha and Rogan couldn’t make head nor tail of the noise as it played out.

“Weird, isn’t it?” Tripp asked.

The noise continued. A striking ‘whump’ – like an excessive boom on a drum – shot through the screen.

Spooky the cat raised his eyes and shrieked. Samantha turned over her shoulder. “Bad cat.”

She hissed and settled into the prone position. Ready to attack anything that came into her proximity.

“What’s she doing?”

“I don’t know,” Samantha said, suddenly very nervous at their cat’s behavior.

“Spooky,” Rogan climbed off his mother’s lap and walked over to the cat. “What are you doing?”

“Tilt the camera down, Samantha,” Tripp said, putting two-plus-two together. “Is there anyone else there with you?”

“No,” Samantha said, watching her son approach the cat. “It’s just us.”

“Nothing unusual happening in the room?”

“It’s very unlike her,’ she mused, turning back to the screen. “Rogan?”

“Yes, mummy?”

“Be careful with her.”

Tripp watched the screen with great intent. Rogan approached Spooky, but felt as if he couldn’t get too close. The cat was incredibly pent-up and ready to launch at someone – anyone.

“Wait, wait,” Tripp looked up the ceiling and cleared his throat. “Manuel?”

“Yes, Tripp?”

“Play the message again, please.”

The book floated into Tripp’s hand. He looked at the page containing the image.

The transmission fired up again.

Static for the first two seconds.

The sound of an electric chord fired up.

And then – boom. A semi-pulsar throttle for two seconds.

Spooky shrieked once again, much to Samantha, Rogan and Tripp's amazement.

"Her tail has gone bushy," Samantha provided a commentary as the signal continued to play. "She's upset."

"Keep an eye on her," Tripp pointed at the screen. "I'm curious to see something…"

The audio static dampened. The "chords" grew louder, followed by another thud.

Instead of shrieking, Spooky widened her eyes and let out a calm meow.

"What the…?" Samantha asked no-one in particular.

"Hey, Spooky," Rogan crouched and offered her his hand. "Give me a cuddle."

The cat turned to the hand and licked around its mouth. She thought over the opportunity for a hug for a few seconds.

The transmission static fizzed up once again, followed by a third and final "whump" – like that of a heartbeat.

Spooky jumped in the air and wailed, barely landing on her feet. The cat's violent reaction caused Rogan and his mother to yelp back in fright.

Tripp could barely believe his eyes. Spooky rolled over and returned to her feet. The poor animal was exhausted. She trundled over to her favorite area of the carpet and rolled around, quite satisfied with herself.

Rogan and Samantha turned back to the screen, not knowing what to say or think.

"My God," Tripp whispered to himself, focusing more on the family cat than his wife and son for the first time in his life. "What on Earth is going on with her?"

One Year Later…

Every major city in every country held trials to find USARIC's one perfect feline specimen.

The United Kingdom hopped onto the opportunity much like all the other nations on planet Earth.

One such venue in northwest London's Chrome Valley was home to the company's *Star Cat* program. It wasn't the most attractive of venues. The CV Stadium was built in 2080 to house the valley's once-promising soccer team. Shortly after relegation from First Division, and with the introduction of an altered ball, CVFC was no longer sponsor-worthy.

As such, the stadium lost the majority of its funding. The knock-

on effect was disastrous. The ground became decrepit and unusable. The vagrant issue was rife because it provided shelter from the intensely hot summers and deadening winters.

The CV Stadium has been home to Star Cat Trials for the past four months. Just one of six locations within London alone.

There were at least two hundred people in line, all waiting with their pet cats in carry cases.

A mother-and-son pair were next in line for registration.

Five-year-old Jamie Anderson and his mother, Emily, approached the desk. Emily placed the plastic carriage on the counter.

The official looked up at Emily and smiled. 'Name?'

"Emily Anderson—"

"—No, I'm sorry, I mean the cat's name?"

"Oh," Emily said, looking through the plastic bars. An orange face poked around, wanting to be set free. "Jelly."

"Jelly?"

"Yes, Jelly Anderson."

"Okay," the official said, typing on her keyboard. She hit a button and the printer roared to life. "Jelly Anderson. Just peel off the back and attach it to the cage, if you would."

Emily took strip of paper examined it. The cat's name and a serial number adorned the front. She peeled the edge away and slapped the sticky end to the plastic top of the cage.

"Please go to the weigh-in, Mrs. Anderson."

"Mum?" Jamie asked his mother as they entered a darkened causeway with many other families.

"Yes, poppet?"

"What happens if Jelly gets chosen?"

"I don't think that will happen," Emily said, looking up at the space-themed walls. "There are so many people hoping that their cat will win."

"How many, mum?"

"I don't know. Like, maybe millions?"

"Wow, that's a lot."

"We'd stand more chance of winning the lottery than Jelly being picked."

Jamie walked alongside his pet in the cage. Due to his height – all four feet and one inch of it – he had a perfect view of Jelly swinging back and forth in her cage.

"It's okay, Jelly," Jamie smiled, "You'll be fine."

Jelly wasn't terribly happy at the prospect of being put up for selection. Of course, she was a domestic house cat. But that was the point.

A man walking in front of Emily and her son shot them a grin. “Seems really stupid, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, I know,” Emily resigned herself to the fact that this whole endeavor was probably a bit silly.

“A complete waste of time. And space, probably.”

Emily smiled and nodded at the man’s cage. “What do you have?”

He lifted the cage and revealed his cat’s face. “Abyssinian. Her name is Trixie.”

“Aww, she’s lovely.”

“And yours?”

Jamie grabbed the cage and tried to lift it up. He barely managed it. “This is Jelly.”

“Oh. Cute cat.”

“Thanks,” Jamie passed the cage back to his mother. “We don’t think she’ll win, though.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Because there are a million people all over the planet trying to win.”

“It’s a lot of money, though,” the man said with a smile, “And think of all the fame it will bring.”

Jamie looked up at Emily. “Mum, what is fame?”

“It’s when everyone knows who you are.”

“Wow. So, like, if someone’s cat wins, does that mean they will have lots of money and everyone will know them?”

“Yes, poppet.”

The line shuffled forward.

Emily and Jamie could see the weigh-in facility a few meters in the distance. The sheer volume of participants obstructed the view.

To entertain the masses in the dark tunnel, several giant TV screens hung on the walls, reminding them why they were there.

The Star Cat logo was typically futuristic, spinning around on its axis. Friendly music played over the screens as the logo disappeared. It was replaced by a bespectacled woman in a white suit standing in front of a night sky full of stars.

“Welcome to the Star Cat Trials, London Base Six. USARIC thanks you for taking the time to reach out to us and taking part in this historic event.”

An illustration of a cat showed up on the screen. The woman pointed her stick and the body.

“In order to facilitate a smooth and painless process, we ask that you have your cat’s documentation ready for the weigh-in. We would like to remind you of the following eligibility rules.”

Emily nudged her son and pointed at the screen. “Jamie, poppet.

Listen to the lady."

"Okay, mom."

"One, your cat must be female," the voice announced.

"Yes, she is," Jamie said.

"Two, she must be between three and five years of age."

"Yes," Jamie whispered to himself. "She's three-years-old."

"Three," continued the woman on the screen, "She must weigh between five and ten pounds."

Jamie jumped around, giddy with excitement. If he were playing solely by the entrance rules, Jelly would win instantly.

"Yes."

"Four. Your cat must not have any ailments, debilitations or injuries of any kind."

Emily couldn't resist smiling at her son's moment of joy. Jamie was beside himself with glee.

The overwhelming sense of victory was aided by dozens of people leaving the line with their pets.

"Imagine that," Emily muttered as she watched the disappointed men, women and families leave the venue. "Turning up and not knowing the rules? I mean, it's not as if the commercials didn't specify."

"Look at all the people leaving, mom," Jamie said.

Not everyone disembarked, however. The line was still plenty healthy with people all desperate to get their pets into the trials proper.

Just behind the weigh-in counter a sliding door allowed the successful participants into the preparation chamber. From the tunnel, it was impossible to see what lay beyond that door.

The feeling was that of waiting to ride an extraordinary ghost train.

"Okay, next please," said the man by the scale pod.

Emily and Jamie stepped forward.

His little eyes lit up in full admiration of the ceramic plate. Two side vents blew the spent fur and detritus from the previous feline occupant into the air and into a nearby vacuum.

"Here she is," Emily placed the cage onto the panel and opened the gate.

"Thank you, madam," the scale man said and turned to his keyboard. "Name?"

"Jelly Anderson."

"Thank you," he punched the data into the computer. "Age?"

"Three years and one month," Emily took out a paper and handed it to the man.

"Thank you, one moment please."

Jamie stepped over to the cage and offered Jelly his hand. “Come on, Jelly. Let’s get you weighed.”

Jelly didn’t want to come out. It wasn’t until she saw her owner’s smiling, cherub-like face, that she finally relented.

“Thanks, son,” the scale man looked up from the terminal. “Just lead her onto the ceramic edges.”

“Okay.”

The man giggled to himself. “She’s very obedient. I’m sure that will help.”

Jelly exited the cage and made her way onto the ceramic scales, aided by her friend. A beautiful, dark orange house cat. Not a blemish.

Even the scale operator took a moment to look at Jelly’s face. Her bright orange eyes were something of a wonder, and exceptionally unique.

“Cute cat,” he said, double-taking and looking at Emily. “Can I have your address, telephone number, and status, please?”

As Emily gave her details, Jelly followed Jamie’s hand as he moved it to the scales.

In USARIC’s infinite wisdom, the two scales faced one another from opposite sides of the tunnel.

It meant that the cats on each scale had a perfect direct line of vision of each other. It felt combative way before the trials even started.

On the opposite scale was a mother and father with their son, around Jamie’s age.

The sweaty warmth in the tunnel didn’t help matters much. Ventilation wasn’t a top priority. The other family’s cat seemed like it might not pass the weigh-in, looking as it did like a fat snowball with fur and two beady little eyes.

“Ugh, that’s one ugly cat,” Jamie whispered to himself and turned back to Jelly. “Hey, girl.”

“Meow,” Jelly said and sat perfectly still in the middle of the scale.

The four-digit panel above beamed to life and ran through a series of numbers as it adjusted itself to Jelly’s weight.

“Okay, here we go,” the scale man said, watching the numbers slow down to a crawl. The ceramic plate sunk a few millimeters and rested into position.

The panel lit up with the final score – 3.88 kg – with a triumphant fanfare ringing around the device.

“Ta-daa,” the man said, much to Emily and Jamie’s excitement. “That’s perfect.”

A hefty buzzer sounded off from the adjacent end of the tunnel. The flabby ball of fur failed its weigh-in, clocking in at nearly twice

the weight of Jelly. The final result flashed in red above the scale.

“Sorry, son,” the other scale operator said to the disappointed young lad who had burst into tears. “Maybe next time.”

Jamie watched the boy launch into a tantrum. He stomped his foot to the ground and pointed at his furry blob of uselessness. “I hate you! I hate you! You’re too fat, you stupid cat!”

‘Hey,’ Jamie shouted from across the tunnel. “Don’t call her that.”

The boy turned to Jamie and scowled. “Shut up.”

“Don’t call your cat names. They know when you’re being mean to them.”

“I don’t care,” the boy ran off in a flood of tears, leaving his parents to persuade the fluffy cloud of blubber back into its cage.

Jamie turned back to Jelly to find her licking her paws as if she was the queen of the universe. “Come on, girl. Back in your little house.”

Jamie ushered Jelly back into her cage. He’d seen scores of other families having to push their own cats backwards by the head.

Not with Jelly. Obediently, she gracefully obliged her owners and settled into the cage. Jamie took a moment to digest the wonder of his little feline friend.

She was a year younger than Jamie. They’d seen the world together. Grew up together. Eaten, lived, and laughed together.

The cage bolted shut.

“That’s great, Mrs. Anderson,” the scale operator held out his hand to the sliding screen on the far wall. “If you’d like to make your way into the preparation chamber, we can begin.”

“Excuse me, sir?” Jamie asked.

“Yes, young man?”

“What happens in the preparation chamber?”

“Oh, it’s nothing to worry about. It’s where Jelly will get ready to participate in the events.”

“Thank you,” Emily picked up Jelly’s cage and nodded Jamie out of the room. “Come on, poppet.”

“Yes, mom.”

The pair walked toward the sliding doors, and into the preparation chamber.

CHAPTER TWO

"Welcome to the Preparation Chamber," came a soothing female voice as Emily and Jamie walked through the door. "Your allocated booth is marked on the slip attached to your cat's cage."

"What number are we, poppet?"

Jamie looked at the slip. "Eighteen, mom."

One hundred marked booths lined the walls in the vast space.

Quad One, to their immediate right, held booths one through twenty-four. Quad Two, twenty-five through forty-nine, and so on.

A technician dressed in a silver suit approached the pair. "Hello, there. Number?"

"Eighteen."

Jamie marveled at the set-up. The place was heaving with people of all shapes and sizes being greeted by technicians and making their way to the allocated booths.

The stench of cat was almost as tremendous as their wails for freedom.

Rattling cages.

The occasional hiss from one cat when it spotted another.

Jelly, however, remained calm and refined. It was almost as if she refused to bow down to her feline stereotype.

"Just through here, please." The technician walked the pair into the first Quadrant and put Jamie at ease. "So, exciting day today, huh?"

"Yes. My cat made it."

"What's her name?"

"Jelly."

"Oh, cool. After the movie?"

"Yes, *Star Jelly* is my favorite," Jamie said as the technician pushed a button on the wall. The door to booth eighteen slid open.

"Wow."

The individual preparation chambers measured twelve by ten feet. The bank sitting in the middle of the room contained a desk and a computer. It must have seemed vaguely threatening to the untrained eye.

It certainly caused consternation in the overactive mind of a five-year-old boy. Jamie had second thoughts about the place.

The technician clocked Jelly's name on attached to her cage.

"*Jelly*?"

"Yes, mister."

"Funny name for a cat, isn't it?"

“She’s named after my favorite film.”

“Ah, *Star Jelly*?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” The technician pointed at the padded bank. Whatever was about to happen would at least be conducted in relative comfort for his cat.

Emily placed the cage on the surface and unclipped the plastic housing cage.

“Come on, Jelly,” Jamie said, beckoning her forward.

She wouldn’t move.

“Not very obedient, is she?”

“She’s a cat, mister.”

“Come on, girl,” Emily poked her face through the cage. “It’s okay.”

Jelly let out a whine, never tearing her gaze away from the computer and wires coming from the front compartment.

Emily lost her temper. “You’re testing my patience, puss.”

“Mom, wait. Let me try.”

Jamie lowered his head and widened his eyes. Jelly tore her gaze away from the dreaded computer and looked him dead in the retinas.

“What’s wrong, Jelly?”

Her pupils dilated and turned a stale yellow. She groaned and lowered her head.

“Jelly, girl. Gimme paw.”

Jamie knew how to get the better of his feline friend. He held out the back of his hand with his fingers closed together.

It did the trick.

Jelly couldn’t resist moving forward and head-butting his hand. It was enough for Jamie’s hand to slide along her wonderfully silken coat and gently bring her out of the cage. “There we go.”

Jelly plonked herself on the padded surface and wasted no time in checking out her surroundings.

Not terribly much to see upon initial viewing. Four walls, a bright fluorescent bulb on the ceiling and three humans smiling back at her.

The technician hit a button on the console. The screen jumped to life which, in turn, made Jelly jump back.

Three rows appeared on screen, each of them waiting for a connection to their subject.

The technician slid his hand under Jelly’s stomach and brought her over to the wires. “We’ll get her hooked up and we’ll see what’s doing.”

“Paw,” Jamie said, holding out his hand. Jelly looked at his palm and sniffed around. “Gimme paw, girl.”

She did as instructed. It was enough for the technician to attach

the connected band around her wrist.

"Can you hold her for me, please?" the technician asked.

"Sure."

Jelly trundled into his Jamie's arms. The second she relaxed, she knew something was amiss.

"Meow," Jelly said, her body starting to vibrate.

The first row pinged to life, measuring her heart-rate.

Bip… bip… bip…

"Steady, steady," the technician looked at his transparent tablet and made a note on the screen. "That's good, a constant fifty-five BPM."

"What are you doing, mister?" Jamie asked, keeping Jelly pinned to the surface.

"We need to make sure Jelly, here, is fit for the trials. The good news is that her heartbeat is regular. I see she weighs three point nine kilos, which is what we want."

A commotion came from outside the room.

Jamie, Emily and the technician turned to look through the window in the door. They saw a man pacing around, running his hands through his chair. "Oh, no!"

"I'm sorry, sir," a female technician approached him, carrying an unconscious cat in her arms. "I can assure you, she'll be fine."

"What did you do?"

"She's allergic to the computer. I'm afraid we'll have to send her to the recovery room."

The technician followed the man away from the door to a crowd of petrified onlookers.

"Oh no," Jamie said. "What happened?"

"Allergies," the technician said, "Some participants have undiscovered allergies picked up by the computer. Some are allergic to the chip we need to install, so it's better we know now before we commit."

"I don't know what that means? A chip?"

"Look," the technician pointed to Jelly, who had a synthetic cap stretched around the top of her head. "See this?"

"Yes."

"Look at the screen."

An imprint of Jelly's brain glowed on screen in various colors. "These are all the lobes in Jelly's brain. No sign of any damage, which is good."

He pointed at the front of the image. "This is the frontal lobe, the part of the brain that acts as a sonar. Over here in the middle is the sleep center, which is slightly smaller than usual. The back of the

brain is very active."

"What does that do?"

"Is Jelly protective of you and your house?"

"Yes, but we don't live in a house. We live in an apartment. She's always looking for things to fight with."

"Makes sense. This is the area of the brain that lets her fight and mark her territory."

The technician looked at Jelly. She screwed her face back at him, unhappy with the intrusion on her privacy.

"Well done, Jelly." The technician reached under the console and hit a button.

The screen went dead and slid up, revealing a black metal cage. He pulled it forward and opened the door.

"What happens now?" Emily asked.

"Well, she's fit to take part in the trials."

The technician removed Jelly's cap and wristband. He covered her face with his palm and pushed her backwards.

"Hey," Jamie got defensive. "Don't do that."

"I need to get her into the box."

Jelly clawed back at the technician, having no choice but to walk backwards. "That's right, Jelly. In you go."

"Stop that," Jamie grabbed the man's arm, "She'll go in herself."

"Sorry, no. We can't take the risk," the technician placed his hand on the box to stop it from running backwards. "Look at her, she's already fighting back."

"That's because you're forcing her."

"Poppet, let the man do his thing."

"But—"

Jelly whined. A final attempt to claw the technician's hand as it left her face was thwarted when he shut the door.

A whirring noise from behind the screen started up. Behind it, a mini conveyor belt traveled backwards, much like a baggage delivery system at an airport.

"Bon voyage, and good luck," the technician said, waving at Jelly.

Jelly's disillusionment was matched by Jamie's.

She placed her paw on the glass door, begging for Jamie to reach out.

"Jelly…"

"Poppet, it's okay. She's perfectly safe."

"But, but…"

Jelly meowed as her cage rolled backwards along the belt and into the darkness.

"It's okay, Jamie," the technician said, "You'll see her out in the arena in about half an hour. She's perfectly safe, I can assure you."

Jamie was convinced. For the first time in his young life, his best friend had abandoned him.

Emily wasn't much consolation either, no matter how hard she rubbed her son's shoulder.

The technician took pity on the mother and son as the belt delivered Jelly to her destination and out of sight. "It's never a nice feeling. But I promise, Jamie, it will all be worth it."

The Manuel

Page 200, 456 – "Saturn Cry"

Let's look at a live feed of Saturn, our solar system's sixth planet, and the second-largest planet.

The images you can see are provided by something called a Star Drone. *It was sent to the ringed planet three years ago to discover what happened to a vessel named* Space Opera Alpha.

In the year 2110 the International Moon Station, *known in common parlance as* IMS, *received what could readily be described as a distress call from the ringed planet.*

The message itself reached the primary radio situated on the space station in just under an hour and a half.

The world's foremost linguisticians and authorities on communication could not make head nor tail, if you'll forgive the pun, of the message.

The communication itself lasted only thirty seconds. A mixture of sounds that the common human being would recognize as static, more often than not punctuated by the sound of three chords from an electric guitar.

One of Earth's most intelligent scientific minds, Pascal D'Souza *(2056–2111), studied the waveform.*

He spent three months listening to the recording on virtual repeat and came up with nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

The intense diet of listening to nothing other than Saturn Cry *affected his health in general. Whenever he spoke to his wife or child, a strange hum would fall out of his mouth instead of the words he intended to use.*

For example, saying 'Hello, honey. How was your day?' came out as the sound of a yet-to-be-opened bottle of soda releasing its gas, followed by a hiccup.

His wife grew increasingly fed up with her husband's insistence on listening to Saturn Cry. *Especially over and above sundry conversations about paying bills, securing a place at a top school for their child and how often she thought they should indulge in congress.*

One sunny day as she prepared to wash the dishes, Pascal asked what was for dinner. At least, that's what he thought he had asked. In actuality, all he had done was clear his throat and say the word 'frog' in a sarcastic manner.

She turned around and thumped him across the head with her fist in frustration.

The result of this action caused the playback in Pascal's memory bank to slow down quite accidentally. It was at this time that D'Souza made what was to become a very important discovery.

Three distinct 'boom' sounds occurred throughout the message.

When played at regular speed, the 'booms' were indistinct. Slowed down by approximately fifteen percent, however, they became very noticeable indeed.

The discovery of the three 'bumps' was a revolutionary moment in humanity's comprehension of Saturn Cry.

Due to the marital upset the dishes were never washed that night, either…

USARIC

United States and Russian Intergalactic Confederation

Location: IMS International Moon Station
Date: 13th January, 2117
Committee Meeting #1029 / 12

The boardroom.

A cone-shaped table with twelve chairs surrounding it. In each chair, a man in a suit engaged in conversation with their neighbor.

USARIC's logo hologram spun around on the surface of the conference table.

"People, may I have your undivided attention, please?" asked the hologram. "Thank you."

The logo fizzed away to nothing as the men adjusted themselves in their seats.

One of the men rose from his chair at the head of the table. Dimitri Vasilov, the deputy chief of USARIC, stood awkwardly on account of his unsound leg. In his sixties, he spoke with a Russian-cum-Texan drawl.

His name appeared on the holographic console.

Tripp Healy sat in the eighth chair, dressed in his military uniform.

Dimitri cleared his throat and looked at Tripp.

"As you know, the Select Committee has concluded its

deliberations. I've asked Commander Tripp Healy from the American Star Fleet here today to deliver their update on Opera Alpha. Tripp?"

"Thank you, Dimitri."

Tripp stood up and yanked on the sleeves of his combat jacket. "Can we call up Opera Alpha, please?"

"Yes, Mr Healy."

A holoprint of Space Opera Alpha appeared several inches above the surface of the console. It spun around on its central axis very slowly, offering the board members every conceivable angle of its body.

"Forgive me for the summary, but I feel it's important to establish the findings of the select committee. As you know, in 2113, USARIC sent Opera Alpha to Saturn to try to discern the source of Saturn Cry."

A picture of a Japanese woman in her twenties appeared above the rotating ship.

"On board was captain Zillah Chin-Dunne and a manned crew of five. Also on board was a K-12 series Androgyne unit, along with the autopilot computer, Manuel."

The holoprint of Zillah vanished. Tripp waved his hand to the left, enlarging the image of the vessel.

"A year later, Opera Alpha confirmed with USARIC Base that they'd reached Saturn's vicinity. Specifically, one of its moons named Enceladus. It was established that Enceladus was the source of the transmission. Approximately five days later, all communications were cut. Three years later, we are still without communicable channels to Opera Alpha. Saturn, or, more precisely, Enceladus, continues to "cry" and our primary radio satellites continue to receive the message."

Tripp splayed his fingers out from his palm and enlarged the Enceladus holoprint.

"Excuse me, Tripp?" asked a board member.

"Yes?"

"What of Space Opera Alpha?"

"We don't know," Tripp snapped his fingers, which called up a recorded video. "Since 2110 we've been at a loss in trying to decode the message. Space Opera Beta is in its tertiary phase and will launch next year."

Tripp pressed the play button on the holovideo. A picture of his son and wife appeared on the screen.

"Three weeks ago, however, I made something of a discovery. Before you watch the video, I'd like you to bear in mind that USARIC's select committee has green-lit the proposal I am about to put forward to you."

Tripp lifted his palm, raising the sound.

The recorded video displayed Spooky, The Healy family's cat, sitting on Samantha's lap. Tripp's voice spoke to her from behind the camera.

"Honey, I'll play the message again."

"Okay," Samantha said, pressing her cheek on top of Spooky's head. "Shh, don't worry."

"Meow," Spooky licked her paw, enjoying her owner's warmth.

"Okay, do it."

A button click, launching the recording of Saturn Cry.

A hiss started, followed by an electric guitar chord.

Spooky turned to the monitor, trying to ascertain the source of the noise.

And then – *whump*.

Spooky launched out of Samantha's arms and landed on her lap, terrified. She let out a death-defying growl.

"Keep her still, honey," Tripp's voice came from behind the lens.

"I'm trying, Tripp," she grumbled, struggling to clutch the cat. "She's really hassled, right now. She wants me to let her go—"

"—No, don't let her go. Let the sound keep playing."

As the hiss died down and the "strumming" of the guitar loudened, a dog trundled in the distance. It wondered what was going on.

Whump. The second jolt within the message flew through the screen. Spooky meowed loudly and curled up in Samantha's arms.

"How is she now?" Tripp asked.

"She's purring."

"My God," Dimitri leaned into the recording, "Are you trying to tell us that the cat is responding to Saturn Cry?"

Tripp slammed his palm into the holographic recording, pausing it. A freeze-frame of the dog showed its silly face all confused.

"That's right. Interestingly, Sparky, our dog, isn't responding at all."

Dimitri turned to his superior, Maar Sheck, the CEO of USARIC. "Maar?"

"Tripp?" Maar placed his hands onto the edge of the console. "Are you trying to tell me that your cat can *read* the message?"

"No. I'm not saying that."

"So you're saying…" Maar tried before resigning to confusion. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying the message is eliciting a response from my cat, and not my dog."

Maar folded his arms and shook his head. "Explain it to me like I'm a five-year-old, Mr Healy."

"Keep watching."

Tripp resumed the video. The static crept over the guitar's strings and provided the final *boom* as the recording closed. Spooky's eyes bulged. She let out a long wail.

Tripp paused the video. "There are three distinct bumps in the audio. The first occurs at twelve seconds. It angers the cat. The second bump happens at exactly twenty seconds, which appears to makes her comfortable."

"And the third bump?" Maar asked.

"As you saw, it made her howl like a dog. It happens at the twenty-six second mark."

Maar pointed at the paused Sparky. "And the dog?"

"He didn't respond at all," Tripp shrugged his shoulders. "He may as well have been listening to Strauss. No reaction whatsoever."

"Have we tried other animals?" Dimitri asked.

"I'm glad you asked that, because that was my first thought. Here's a selection of other animals we played the track to."

Up first, a recording of a parrot in a cage. The woman on screen angled the video to its cage.

"Who's a pretty boy, then?" said the parrot.

"Clarkey," the woman's voice came from behind the camera. "Listen carefully. My friend is going to play you a song."

"Play-a-song, play-a-song," Clarkey squawked.

The message began to play – *hisssss*.

Electric guitar chords.

WHUMP – twelfth second.

Clarkey bopped his head back and forth, largely unperturbed by the message.

"Clarkey?" the woman asked, "Do you like this song?"

"It's terrible-terrible-terrible."

A bearded man with spectacles looked into the lens and turned his device to the left.

Round two: A recording of a tank of exotic fish. A babbling brooks coughed out bubbles around the dozens of goldfish merrily swimming their way around.

"Okay, is that good?" asked the man.

"Yeah," Tripp's voice came from behind the lens, "Make sure the speaker is right up against the glass."

"You got it."

"Okay, in three, two, one…"

Hisssss… the message fired up.

"Nothing's happening," said the man, looking around the fish tank. "They're just sort of swimming around."

“Of course they’re swimming around,” Tripp snapped. “They’re fish. Be quiet a moment, and let me listen.”

The twelfth second struck – *boom*.

The sound wave hit the glass and sent a riptide across the water. The fish swam against the current, failing to react to the noise. They couldn’t have been less interested.

The man looked into the camera. “Tripp, did you get what you need?”

“Ugh, forget it.”

The third and final video.

A scurrying of dimly-lit boots traveled along a gravel path.

“I could get in serious trouble for this, you know,” a woman’s voice whispered above the frantic movement into the tiger enclosure.

“Thanks for doing this, Shannon,” Tripp’s voice came from behind the lens.

She lifted the camera. A tiger enclosure bleached into view.

“A zoo?” Maar looked up from the screen. “You’ve got too much time on your hands, Tripp.”

“You call process of elimination a waste of time?” Tripp asked, before realizing who he was dealing with. “Oh, of course. You’re just the money man, you’re not a scientist.”

“Don’t get insolent, Healy.”

Tripp ignored his superior’s remark and placed his index finger against his lips. “Shh. Watch.”

“Don’t shush me, Healy.”

“Look,” Tripp interjected, “If it didn’t work with a dog or a fish or a bird, then the last natural course of action was to try it with a bigger cat.”

“Oh, my,” Dimitri opened his mouth in wonder as the recording played out..

Shannon focused her lens on the sleeping tiger. “Tripp?”

“Yes?”

“I’m not going in. I’m setting the player down behind the cage. It’ll be plenty loud enough for her to hear it.”

“And it’s definitely a female?”

Shannon set the camera down on the stone ledge and focused the lens on the beast.

“Yes, this is Daisy. She’s relatively sedentary, as you can see. Perfectly harmless.”

“Okay, play the message when you’re ready.”

“Hang on,” Shannon reached into her belt and pulled out a tiny black device. She flicked the switch, enabling an array of blue lasers to shoot out and form an audio wave in thin air. “I can’t believe I’m

doing this for you. I could lose my job."

"You always were one for adventure," Tripp joked.

She shot the lens a look of incredulity. "Oh, har-har. Remind me to wipe out all those dates we had before you joined NASA and ran off and married my sister."

"Shh. Keep your voice down and play the track."

Shannon giggled and hit the play button. "Okay, okay. Here we go."

The waveform sprang to life, rifling through the lines of the hiss.

Daisy the tiger didn't budge.

"Nothing's happening."

"I know," Tripp said, "Give it five more seconds."

Guitar chord…. Nine, ten, eleven, and…

Whump.

Daisy continued to sleep. No reaction whatsoever.

"Shannon?"

"Yes?"

"Can we wake her up? She might not be able to hear."

"She's alert, even when she's asleep."

The twentieth second rolled round, in time for the second *boom*.

Still nothing.

The audio wave's visual *bump* representation slid off to the left and out of their lives forever.

The holovideo paused on Daisy the tiger.

The board members – and Dimitri and Maar – turned to Tripp for an explanation.

"So, this is the result. The message only gets a response from cats. Specifically, domesticated female house cats. We played the message to males and they didn't respond."

"Did you try any other lifeforms?" Maar asked.

"The investigation was, and still is, under embargo as per the Infinity Clause. Subsection twelve-point-eight, subsection three. If it wasn't for that, I could have outsourced more—"

"—Okay, I've heard enough, Tripp." Maar walked around the console and waved his hand across the image.

It rolled several thousand frames back to the start of the video, ending with a freeze-frame of Spooky's confused face.

Maar cleared his throat, none-too-happy about the decision he was about to make. He addressed the board members.

"People of the board, USARIC finds itself in a rather invidious position. At once, we have a missing vessel with five of USARIC's souls on board. Their whereabouts and state of wellbeing is unknown. We must presume they have expired. Dimitri?"

The board members looked to Dimitri in solemnity. He stood up and address the men around the cone.

"It strikes me that Tripp, here, has made a worthwhile discovery. The 2085 Bering Treaty stipulates that major advances be kept under embargo until such time as they are established as fact. Since we cannot establish any facts – about the well-being of Space Opera Alpha, the nature of the Saturn Cry or, indeed, if this cat *revelation* is a hoax – it must remain embargoed."

Tripp pressed his hands together, hoping to convince his superiors. "Am I right in thinking if the board votes unanimously ten-to-one in favor of a decision, it will pass?"

"Correct."

Tripp turned to the ten remaining board members. "People, you have seen the evidence presented before you. It sounds as laughable as it is silly, I grant you, but the *fact* remains that USARIC and its scientists and crew are stuck. Opera Beta is due to launch next year, 2118."

Tripp clicked his fingers.

An imprint of Opera Beta appeared above the table. A brilliant-white, cone-shaped space vessel with a revolving cylindrical midsection.

"I am commander for this upcoming mission to Enceladus. We need answers. Not only to what happened to Opera Alpha, but also to the meaning of Saturn Cry. The question is, can you, in good conscience, allow my crew and I up there *knowing* that we failed to thoroughly scrutinize the opportunities present in my findings?"

The board muttered amongst themselves. Maar stepped forward with a great deal of sincerity.

"Be careful what you wish for, Tripp."

"I know what I'm doing."

The board members reached a conclusion quicker than Tripp was able to ask.

"Board members, I ask your permission for a temporary lift of Infinity Clause twelve-point-eight, subsection three. Ergo, you afford USARIC the opportunity to pursue this feline line of inquiry with regard to Saturn Cry. To make it public and, if the research should produce results, find the most suitable subject to join the Opera Beta crew and assist them in deciphering the code."

All ten board members raised their hands, much to Dimitri and Maar's astonishment.

Tripp breathed a sigh of relief. The board voted unanimously to kick-start the search for the first cat in space. A historic moment.

"Quite amaziant, Healy," Dimitri chuckled, "You're good."

"I know."

CHAPTER THREE

Do you own a cat?

If so, USARIC needs your help.

We are on the hunt to find the most suitable domesticated feline for the first ever cross-species manned flight into space.

Hundreds of thousands of participants are signing up their pet to USARIC's Star Cat project.

The selected candidate will receive a lifetime of fully comprehensive insurance. Her owners will be awarded two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars.

The entry criteria is simple and subject to official verification:

1: Your cat must be female.

2: She must be unsterilized.

3: Aged between three and five years.

4: Weigh between five and ten pounds.

Could your cat be the first feline in space? If she conforms to the entry criteria, and you wish to take part in this ground-breaking advancement in space exploration, please visit StarCatProject on all Individimedia channels and enter your pet today.

USARIC. The prowl is on.

CV Stadium (United Kingdom) – Presently…

Jamie watched the commercial on the one-thousand-foot screen that hung on the north-side of the arena. It resembled a proper sports stadium, about the size of a regular football pitch.

The logo for the Star Cat Project contained a furry paw with shiny metal claws encased on a titanium circle. The image revolved to cheering from at least fifty-thousand audience members.

Jamie and Emily sat in the participant gallery, surface level to the events that were about to play out on the pitch.

The commotion from the audience forced Jamie to raise his voice.

"Mom?"

"Yes, poppet?"

"What happens now?"

Emily pointed to a bank of metal cages being hauled to the west side of the arena.

"See that?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"The numbers go from one to fifty. Jelly is in paddock eighteen. They're going to race."

Jamie leaned forward onto the back of a little girl's chair. Her blonde hair folded over the back and got trapped under his arm.

"Hey!"

"Oh, sorry," Jamie said, lifting his arms. "I didn't mean to."

She brushed her shoulder and smiled at Jamie. "That's okay."

Jamie screwed his face and mustered up the courage to break the ice. "Is your cat taking part?"

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

"Cindee," the girl said. "She's number forty-four."

"My name is Jamie. What's your name?"

"Fiorina. Nice to meet you, Jamie." She took his hand and yanked it up and down. Clearly, Jamie had never shaken anyone's hand until now. In fact, neither had she. Both had seen adults do it a lot, recently, and it made them feel like a bit older than they were.

Fiorina's mother smiled at Jamie. He returned the sentiment and leaned back in his chair.

"My cat's name is Jelly, and she's going to win."

"Oh yeah?" Fiorina asked. "Like *Star Jelly*?"

"Yeah," Jamie revealed, confidently, "She's always running up trees and stuff."

"Cindee does that, too," Fiorina chuckled to herself. "We'll see who is faster."

Dramatic music rocketed out of the arena speakers as the lights dipped down. The commotion from the audience died down with it.

The arena's mega-screen flickered, propelling a holographic title into the middle of the grounds.

"Welcome, people, to the Chrome Valley CV Arena. Please remain seated and ensure all Outernet devices are switched off."

Emily looked at Jamie. "Show me your arm, poppet—"

"—but, Mom, I switched it off, already."

"Just do it, please."

Jamie rolled up his shirt sleeve and presented his wrist to his mother. The gray square imprint stretched across his veins like a moving Rorschach inkblot. The square closed in on itself and formed a straight line from his wrist to the crook of his elbow.

"See?"

"Good. The last thing we want is to get disqualified because you didn't turn it off."

"I know, Mom."

A spotlight shone on the banks of paddocks. Seconds later, fifty white lines shot up the width of the arena from the paddock gates to the east wall.

Another light snapped on to the end-point. Each end of the fifty rows illuminated to reveal a five-inch-high bank containing five holes. That was about all the audience could see from this distance.

"Attention *people*," the female voice announced from behind the mega screen, "USARIC is committed to the safety and the wellbeing of all the contenders. We ask that you remain seated at all times during the trials. Any attempts to interact with the trials will result in immediate disqualification."

A soundtrack began to play as the white running lines lit up. "People, welcome to the Star Cat Project, and the Star Cat Trials, London. Now, please welcome your host… Gunnar Kane."

The audience erupted with excitement as Gunnar, a smartly dressed man with bright white teeth, sprinted in front of the track and held out his arm. He gripped his headset and pointed and winked at random people in the audience.

"Wow, thank you for that wonderful app-*paws*!" he said in his thick, southern-American accent.

The crowd laughed at the joke as Gunnar stepped back and pointed at the paddocks.

"We truly have the cream of the crop with us today. Fifty of London's premiere contenders. Give it up for the felines, would you?"

The crowd burst into applause once again.

The cats in the paddocks rattled the bars. Some with their paws, others with their noses. They didn't look especially happy to be cooped up within the cages.

Jelly didn't move very much. She dug her claws into the fabric surface and licked her lips, itching for the bars to be released.

"Let's begin." Gunnar joined a panel of three judges at a desk near the participants' seating block. "Round one…"

Round One

- Agility -

The title of the activity appeared on the mega-screen, showing various clips of cats running and jumping around.

"Agility. In this first round, whichever contender reaches the end of the one-hundred meter track and hits the button on the floor wins. The first three will then proceed to the next round."

"Mom, look," Jamie pointed at the eighteenth paddock. "There she is."

Jelly pressed her nose through the bars and sniffed around. Jamie and Emily could just about make her out from their seats.

“This will be interesting,” Emily said. “Come on, Jelly. Don’t screw this up.”

Jamie shuffled in his seat and pressed his palms together. “Come on, Jelly.”

“Here we go,” Gunnar announced through his headset. “In three… two… one…”

The music ground to a halt as the audience held their breath in anticipation. Gunnar waved his hand down, signaling the start of the activity.

“Go!”

The paddock cages flew open, releasing the animals.

Ten of the cats, including Jelly, jumped out.

The others whined and either nestled down for comfort or tried to attack the opened bars.

“Okay, that’s ten, eleven, fifteen and eighteen out of the paddock, followed by twenty-two, twenty-five and forty-two and forty-four,” Gunnar commentated over the proceedings. “Not much in it between them as they wander around.”

Jelly stepped forward and poked around the white line. The moment her nose crossed over, a spark ignited, forcing her back into her row.

“No, they’re hurting her!” Jamie jumped to his feet. “There’s electricity keeping them in line.”

“What?”

Jelly shook her head and turned to the east side. The white lines flickered and trailed along the width of her path, promising salvation one hundred meters away.

“Go on, Jelly!” Jamie shouted over the crowd, as he watched his cat trundle along the path. “Yes, yes.”

Fiorina climbed to her feet and threw her arms in the air. “Come on, Cindee. Run.”

The white cat in lane forty-four made eyes at Jelly in lane eighteen and hissed.

Jelly stood her ground and flicked her tail. “Meow.”

“I think our contestants need a little encouragement, guys,” Gunnar said to the audience. “How about it?”

The crowd cheered with excitement.

Just then, the cat in lane twenty-two, a slinky silver-furred beast, figured out what she was supposed to be doing. She leaned back on her haunches and propelled forward.

“Jelly,” Jamie screamed at Jelly, “Run, run.”

Gunnar hit a button on the console. A holograph of a common mouse snapped into each of the fifty lanes. The image shot along the path, catching all the cats attention.

Jelly meowed and bolted after the rodent.

"Yes, go. Go," Jamie clapped his hands, keeping an eye on lane forty-four.

Cindee chased after her holographic mouse, keeping up with Jelly's speed.

The silver pet in lane twenty-two gained on Cindee and Jelly as they raced forward.

"Here we go," Gunnar said, "It seems it's between eighteen, twenty-two, and forty-four."

The holographic mice whizzed toward the east end of the arena, with Jelly, Cindee and the nameless silver cat in hot pursuit.

"Cindee's going to win," Fiorina jumped in her shoes with astonishment. "Go, Cindee."

"No, she's not," Jamie barked at his new friend. "Jelly's gonna smash her."

The mega-screen displayed a top-down view of the racing track. Cindee's paws pushed out a few inches in front of Jelly.

The silver cat shot in between the pair and launched into the air, trying to take a swipe at the mouse.

It was enough to catapult the shiny ball of fluff through the holograph and ahead by several lengths.

Jelly sped up and ran through her holograph, causing her fur to spark and stand on end. "Meeoow!"

"Eighteen is leading by a nose to twenty-two in second and, finally, forty-four in third," Gunnar announced to the audience. "Only twenty meters to go."

Cindee gained on the pair and deliberately jumped to the left, knowing that the white line might zap her and send her to the head of the pack.

It did.

Cindee's shoulder connected with the invisible barrier and spun her around in mid-air, throwing her to her paws, aiding her travel.

She blasted through the holograph of her mouse, sending a shower of orange sparks forward and first past the finish line.

She slammed her paws on the button surface and tumbled over three times.

A giant gong sounded off as the mega screen burst to life, revealing that lane forty-four had won.

"We have a winner," Gunnar said, as the silver cat barreled into second position.

Jelly screeched to a halt in third place and tumbled over the button on the ground…

Round One

Agility Results

1st place: *Cindee* (The Family Beamish)
2nd Place: *Bullet* (The Family Cotter)
3rd Place: *Jelly* (The Family Anderson)

Three cat handlers approached the winners of the race and ushered each of them into a mobile cage.

"Aww, man," Jamie stomped on the ground and folded his arms in a huff.

"Calm down, poppet," his mother said, yanking him back to his seat. "Cindee won that one, fair and square."

"It's not fair."

Fiorina clapped her hands together amid the onslaught of adulation from the crowd behind them. "Yes, yes, yes…"

"That's not fair," Jamie said, smacking her across the shoulder. "Your cat cheated."

"She did not."

"Yes, she did. She used the electric barrier to speed her up."

"So? That's allowed, you know," the girl spun around and threatened to smack Jamie. "Your stupid orange cat is just too fat and slow."

"Don't say that about Jelly."

"Hey, hey. Stop this *lessense*, please," Fiorina's mother broke the two children apart with her hands. "Play nice, or don't play at all."

"*She* was the one talking *lessense*," Jamie said with complete superiority. "Silly cheater."

"I never cheated. You're just a bad loser."

"I'm sorry about this, Mrs Beamish," Emily said, clutching her son's arm and forcing him back to his seat. "Jamie's just a bit upset about the result."

"That's fine, but I'd appreciate it if your son wouldn't hit my daughter."

Fiorina scowled at Jamie. She stuck her tongue out at the boy and sat back into her seat.

"Idiot," Jamie muttered a little too loudly.

"Shut up, ugly."

Round Two

"And then there were *three*," Gunnar said, stepping back to allow the white panels to slide forward to the middle of the arena.

"Round two will measure our three contenders ability to think, consider and operate to the best of their intelligence. Welcome to… *Prowess*."

The title of the game fizzed to life on the mega-screen, showing footage of a variety of pets pushing objects around a gleaming surface.

The female voice provided a narration to the game. "It could be pure intelligence. Of course, it could be luck. *Prowess* contains four holes on the white panel. It's just a matter of who completes the activity first."

Each of the four holes on the panel were cut into different shapes.

1 – Square

2 – Circle

3 – Star

4 – Crescent

The plastic blocks lay several inches ahead of the slots. Their arrangement, however, did not naturally correspond to the correct hole.

"Which of the three finalists can conquer *Prowess* the first – and the quickest?" Asked the female announcer as the footage faded to black.

Gunnar stepped forward and held out his palm to the activity center in the middle of the arena.

The mega-screen displayed the three finalists in their cages, ready to hop out and do… *something*, at least.

"Here we go," he said, "Handlers, please release our contestants."

The handlers popped open the cages and offered the three cats out and onto the podium in front of the activity.

Jelly trundled out, quite the happy cat. Obediently, she sat on the padded surface, somewhat distracted by the four *toys* in front of her.

After a bit of coaxing, Cindee exited the cage and followed her tail around three times before settling down.

Still to come out of her cage was Bullet.

"Come on," her handler said, "Bullet, let's go."

"She's not very quick, is she?" Fiorina grew impatient and crossed her legs on her seat. "Whose cat is that, anyway?"

"I don't know," Jamie looked around for the owner. "They must be here, someplace."

"She's my cat," said a pasty-faced man his fifties. He sported an unusually long beard. Jamie looked to his right to find he the man sitting all on his own.

“Her name is *Bullet*?”

“Yes.”

“Not very quick, is she?”

“She’s usually pretty good at obeying orders,” he said, worried at Bullet’s refusal to exit the cage.

“Are you here all on your own, mister?”

The man looked down and rubbed his knees through his jeans. “Yes. It’s just me and her.”

“Why did you put Bullet in the contest?”

“Poppet, leave the man alone.”

He turned to Emily and tried for a smile. “No, it’s okay. It’s quite simple, really. I need the money.”

“Yeah,” Emily giggled, “Don’t we all?”

“But what if Bullet wins the trials?” Jamie asked, quite forthrightly. “You would be all on your own?”

“I could get a new cat with the money, though,” the man said.

A curious reaction and concept for a five-year-old to fully comprehend. Jamie thought the man’s response over for what felt like an eternity.

The idea of selling your best friend to make a quick buck gave Jamie the chills. “How could you do that?”

“Quite easily,” the man said, “And it’s not as if I’d never see her again. Life would be better for both of us if she won. And you know something, young man?”

“No, what?”

“She *will* win,” he chuckled and punched his knuckles together.

“No, she won’t. She’s no match for Jelly.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Bullet’s handler had little choice but to hoist her forward under the arms. He plonked the silver cat onto her podium and shut the cage door.

“Oh dear,” Gunnar said, his image displayed on the mega-screen. “I think the judges may knock off a few points for Bullet’s refusal to take part.”

The audience booed and rumbled the ground with their feet. Bullet’s owner folded his arms and sat back into his seat. “Okay, now *that* is unfair.”

Jelly appeared on the giant screen, looking directly at the audience. “Mom, look.”

“Yes, it’s her,” Emily looked at her cat’s face and smiled. “Isn’t she gorgeous?”

“You can do this, Jelly,” Jamie whispered. “Just put the right block in the hole.”

The stadium spotlights twisted around and shone onto the three feline participants, causing the audience to tense up.

"Okay, here we go…" Gunnar announced, "In… three… two… one…"

"Come on, Cindee!" Fiorina muttered loudly enough for Jamie to hear.

"…and, go," Gunnar finished.

Jelly sniffed around the first star-shaped plastic block, hoping it wouldn't pounce back.

Satisfied that the block wasn't the enemy, she rubbed the side of her face along the top point, knocking it onto its side.

"No, Jelly," Jamie gasped, "What are you doing? Don't play with it, you silly girl."

Cindee extended her paw at the square block and tapped it three times in a row. She groaned and flicked the back of her claws at it, knocking it to the surface.

"Yes," Fiorina beamed with glee, "Do it."

Cindee knocked the square into the correct hole, enabling a buzzer to sound off around the arena. The square hole lit up, indicating that it had been solved.

A strange, continual hissing noise played through the speakers. The three cats looked up in confusion.

"That was just lucky," Jamie said to Fiorina, keeping an eye on Jelly.

Bullet, on the other hand, found the crescent shape utterly fascinating. She pawed the top, forcing it to rock back and forth along its curve.

Cindee turned to Bullet and hissed at her. Bullet hissed back and smashed the crescent with her left paw as hard as she could.

The plastic toy rolled off the deck and hit the floor a few feet below them.

Another buzzer sounded off, followed by a red spotlight shining over Bullet's crescent-shaped hole.

"Oh, the judges won't like that," Gunnar narrated

Jelly scanned the four pieces of plastic and then looked down at the four holes. "Meow."

Jamie shuffled in his seat, trying to transmit good vibes. "Come on, Jelly. Do it."

She lifted her paw and felt around the circular hole and sniffed around at it.

"Don't just sit there being stupid," Jamie said, "Put the thing in the *thing*."

Cindee turned to Jelly and murmured. Jelly ignored her and flicked her tail around. She reached forward with both paws and grabbed the circular plastic and threw it into the hole.

Another buzzer shot around the arena, followed by a white spotlight on the completed unit.

"Ooo, now we're neck-and-neck," Gunnar said. "It's amaziant, an intense test of paw-eye coordination."

The hissing sound coming through the speakers grew louder and louder, putting the three cats off their game.

And then, twelve seconds into the noise, the *whump* sound.

Jelly, Cindee and Bullet jumped into the air, startled.

The crowd let out a collective "Oooooh' as the cats returned to their podium, full of anxiety.

"What was that noise, Mom?" Jamie asked.

"I don't know, poppet."

Judging by the look on Gunnar's face, he knew precisely what was going on.

The great unwashed public knew nothing of Saturn Cry. The heats would be a test of the unwashed and their response to it.

Typically, the humans just found it confusing. Perhaps a glitch in the arena's sound system?

The three cats, however, felt that something antagonistic was abound.

So pent-up with anxiety, Bullet accidentally knocked the square off the activity desk, sending it crashing to the ground below. She let out an angry whine and bristled her tail, ready to attack something.

"Bullet, no," the man next to Jamie said, "Don't do it."

"Shh," Fiorina said over her shoulder as she turned back to watch the event.

Bullet dug her claws into the fabric of the podium seat, poised.

"What's she doing?" Fiorina asked herself, watching Bullet turn forty-five degrees to face Cindee. "She's not playing."

Cindee knocked the next shape into the correct hole and reward herself by laying down and licking her paws. It afforded her a perfect view of Bullet, who prepared to launch at her.

The two cats snarled at each other.

Cindee hopped back to her feet and crouched down, her internal alarm sounding off.

Bullet sprang from her podium and pounced onto Cindee, paw-first.

Cindee wailed and smacked Bullet across the face with her claws.

"Hey, wait, wait," Gunnar said, "This isn't on."

Bullet fought back and dug her claws into Cindee's stomach,

pushing her onto her back.

The two tussled and try to tear into each other.

Jelly watched the tussle between her two rivals and accidentally knocked her circular plastic toy into the correct hole. The action took her by surprise.

Cindee and Bullet went at it, screeching and wailing, tumbling back and forth. The remainder of Cindee's blocks flew off the activity bench.

"Someone stop them!" Emily stood up and shouted at the arena floor. "This is crazy."

The handlers moved forward very cautiously, not wanting to alert the two feuding cats.

Then, twenty-seconds into the hissing, another *whump* noise blasted through the speakers.

Cindy and Bullet rolled away from each other and began to purr.

Jelly did the same and returned to sniff her blocks.

Bullet rolled around and stood upright, rubbing Cindee's face with hers.

"Why are they behaving like this?" the man asked, looking around the ceiling of the arena. "And what's that stupid noise?"

"I don't know." Jamie saw Cindee poke her nose around Bullet's behind. She leapt from Cindee's podium and back to her own.

Jelly knocked her fourth and final piece, the crescent, into the slot, quite by accident.

The entire console lit up, followed by a shower of orange sparks.

"I think we have a winner," Gunnar said, pointing to the first podium. "Jelly Anderson."

The crowd cheered as they watched Jelly's face appear on the mega-screen.

"Wow!" Jamie said and clutched Emily's arm. "Mom, Jelly won."

"I know." Emily wasn't as over-the-moon as her son, though. The hissing noise swam around the arena walls, making her uneasy. "I don't quite believe it."

Jelly walked around the podium, displaying her tail to the audience. It was as if she knew she'd won *something*.

Twenty-six seconds into the noise, another *whump* sounded off. Jelly looked up and screamed at the ceiling.

Cindee and Bullet turned to each other, angrily, ready for war once again.

"No, no, no," Gunnar said to the two cats, "Not again."

Cindee and Bullet propelled themselves forward and jumped into the air.

Their bodies collided in mid-air. They squealed as they pawed

away and landed onto Jelly's activity desk.

Jelly back up and watched the two tear themselves apart.

"No. Cindee!" Fiorina stood up and begged the handlers to intervene. They were too far away to hear her, however. "Please make them stop!"

Jelly trundled around the fighting duo, analyzing the situation. She waited for an opportune moment to strike.

She sat up straight and meowed at the top of her lungs. Cindee and Bullet turned to the side and shot Jelly a look of confusion.

Jelly ran her tongue over her teeth and let out a very low howl.

Bullet pushed Cindee away and jumped back to her feet. Cindee rolled over her side and sat on the corner of the console.

Jelly growled once again, telling the pair off. At least, that's what it looked like on the giant screen. Two disobedient and unruly pets brought to task by their victor.

"The judges' decision is in," Gunnar said to the audience, "The winner is… Jelly Anderson!"

The crowd exploded with delight.

Fiorina burst into tears.

"That's not fair," she said, turning to the man sitting in the row behind her. "Your cat ruined Cindee's chances."

"It wasn't my fault," the man said, himself trying not to cry at Bullet's strange behavior.

"Hey, stop it," Jamie said to the pair. He turned his attention to the inconsolable girl in front of him. "Please don't cry."

"Cindee lost," she snorted through her tears and pointed at the screen. "Jelly won. It's not fair."

"Yeah." Jamie looked at Jelly's face on the screen. She had won, and there was no doubt that she knew.

Her vital stats appeared on the screen.

Gunnar approached Jelly and lifted her into his arms. "Jelly Anderson, you're through to the finals. Next month, at Cape Claudius."

Jamie and Emily quite rightfully should have joined the elation coming from the audience in the arena, but they were more concerned about Jelly's response to the fight.

And what the future now held for her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emily and Jamie sat at the front of the transatlantic flight in first class. It was an experience neither of them could have foreseen happening in their lifetimes.

Citizens of the United Kingdom rarely, if ever, were in receipt of such luxuries. Much like the rest of the confederate states of Europe.

Jamie remembered his father telling him about their ancestors being able to travel freely from country to country. Many made it a hobby. Jamie's great-great-grandfather boasted about his conquests at the turn of the twenty-first century. He'd managed to travel the world with relative freedom and blow all his wealth on alcohol and women.

And it was just as well, too.

If he hadn't have been so reckless with money, he wouldn't have met his future wife who would go on to give birth to Jamie's grandfather.

Now, with much of planet Earth's natural resources close to nothing, and with the weather's increasingly erratic temperament, commercial airliners operated one or two flights a week.

Oh, how wonderful it must have been to be alive at the turn of the twenty-first century, Jamie wondered. But this lucky little boy would be the only one among his friends to have ever flown among the clouds and visit another country outside of what used to be known as Europe.

Sure, he'd seen America before in virtual reality. But nothing could compare to actually going there.

Jelly Anderson had won the UK heats in the Star Cat Project Trials. They were on their way to Cape Claudius in South Texas for the international finals in two days' time.

Jelly wasn't able to enjoy the flight's first class luxuries that USARIC had laid on for the owners. She was ensconced in the fuselage along with all the other animals.

The standard six month quarantine had been expedited to just six days for Jelly Anderson.

"Mom?"

"Yes, poppet?" Emily asked, enjoying the comfort of her reclining first class seat and taking a sip from her champagne.

"What happens if Jelly wins?"

"Wins the Star Cat Trials?"

"Yes."

"They'll send her into space."

"But, why?"

"They won't tell us why. I think USARIC just want to be the first to put a cat in space."

Jamie mulled over his mother's response. "But why would you want to be a cat in space, mom?"

"I really don't know, poppet. But they pay a lot of money," Emily took a mouthful of champagne and swished it around her mouth. "And, anyway, Jelly will be perfectly safe. They've been sending people to the moon and other planets for over a hundred years, now."

"Yes, but they are all human people."

"Exactly. So a little cat shouldn't be too much of a problem, right?"

"Hmm."

Jamie turned to his right and looked out of his window. The clouds drifted slowly under the curvature of what seemed like the end of the planet. Looking up, he could make out the edge of the dark, bleakness of space that hung above.

"Mom?"

Emily sighed and pressed the side of her face against her headrest, trying to relax. She closed her eyes. "Yes, poppet. What is it?"

"Space is really high in the sky, isn't it?"

Jamie looked past his reflection in the window and pressed his nose against the glass. His mother didn't answer.

"It's like, *really* high…"

He turned around for a response, only to find his mother had fallen asleep in something of a drunken stupor…

USARIC's The One Arena

Cape Claudius

South Texas: Southeastern Peninsula
(One hundred miles north of Corpus Christi)

"You join us here at Cape Claudius on a bright and sunny day for what should prove to be the mother of all finals…"

The news reporter, a feisty young lady named Dreenagh Remix, stood in front of thousands of people lined up at the entrance to *The One* arena.

A road split the crowd in two sections, barricaded by signage advertising the Star Cat Trials – a black canvas with a silhouette of a cat looking up at the stars.

Heavily armed guards adorned the entrance to the arena. Flashing lights from various personal handsets took pictures.

Fans of the show took selfies of themselves, trying to catch Dreenagh's attention as she reported to the floating camera drone in front of her.

"As you can see, the event has drawn quite an impressive crowd. Indivimedia has gone off the charts," Dreenagh inspected her forearm. The black ink-like substance showed on screen, spinning numbers around at a furious rate. "It seems half the planet's population is tuning in to see just who will win today's spectacular event. Over to the data-glaze now for the odds-on favorites here, today, at Cape Claudius."

The screen flashed and buzzed, revealing the betting odds for the finalists.

Soozie Q-Two (USA) – 20/1
J. Anderson (UK) – 12/1
Bisoubisou (Russia) – 6/1
(all other contestants 25/1 bar)

A black limousine pulled up along the road to a deafening chorus of approval from the insatiable crowd.

Dreenagh approached a little girl cheering behind the railings. She and held her wrist to the girl's face. "Hey, there, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Yes, it's okay," the girl said, keeping her attention on the limousine.

"Who's your favorite to win the finals today?" Dreenagh asked over the roars of the crowd.

"I like Bisoubisou, the Russian Blue cat," the girl said, pulling out her personal handset. She enlarged a picture of a particularly striking gray face and whiskers. The cat's yellow eyes perfected the determined look. "She's got the agility and fight in her. I think she'll beat everyone else."

The limousine crept to a halt.

Two security guards opened the back passenger door and allowed the couple out.

A woman in her forties stepped out from the passenger side, dressed in an expensive dress and shade-wear. The crowd whistled and whooped as she posed for several hovering drones, all hungry for her image.

The woman kept the door open for her five-year-old son. He clutched a medium-sized cage in his hands and waved at the crowd as the car door shut behind him. Like his mother, he sported expensive shade-wear. He removed them so the crowd could get a decent look at his smug, confident face.

"Look, there he is. Remy Gagarin," the little girl squealed, unable

to contain her excitement. “Remy! I love you!”

Remy couldn’t hear his fan’s screams of adulation. He walked along the carpet with his mother, who threatened to steal the thunder with her incredible beauty.

“One has to wonder,” Dreenagh commented over the scene, “If Remy Gagarin’s mother, Elena, isn’t trying to vie for some commercial work. She looks absolutely stunning as she makes her way with her son over to the arena.”

The Manuel

Individimedia and the future of communication

Pg 301,133

(exposition dump #109/3b)

Those of you who were born in the middle of the last century may remember something called Social Media*. A concept noble in intent and, for a short while, rather successful.*

It began in earnest at the turn of the twenty-first century. Several “websites” (i.e. pages on the internet connected by computers and “modems”) were set up. Some failed, and others succeeded. The intention of social media was to connect people together.

And connect, it did.

Family, friends, acquaintances and strangers-in-law.

What the investors of Social Media *could not have foreseen was the temerity of the people who used their service. In order for it to be free, they had to give up their privacy.*

Around fifteen years after its inception, people realized quite quickly that other people “sucked” (an outmoded term for “not being much use”.)

The irony of social media *was that, in trying to get users to socialize, it had the complete opposite effect. So used to utilizing these platforms were the users, that they forgot how to operate as human beings. Particularly when it came to interpersonal relations.*

Marriages broke up.

Some humans forgot how to speak.

Interaction with others grew into an art form.

ADD (Attention Deficit Disorders, and it’s High Definition variant, ADHD) became common place.

The Social Media *war lasted ten days. It claimed over twenty million casualties – all over one idiotic comment a user left on someone’s video of*

their dog jumping from a roof into a paddling pool.

In 2068, Social Media *was outlawed in a desperate bid to reverse the damage.*

Popular "video" streaming sites were closed down.

People were forced to interact physically once again.

It was absolute chaos.

The events that followed the deregulation and subsequent "banning" of Social Media *gave rise to the vastly superior concept of* Individimedia.

Harnessing the same connectivity, Individimedia *was an altogether different beast. Some experts argue that it went right where its predecessor went wrong.*

Individmedia*, simply put, espoused the virtues of individual broadcast and fame. It did not include the ability to comment or interact via those channels.*

The result was a return to physical interaction. Today, Individimedia *is installed on all human beings who were born after the year 2070. A simple piece of technology installed on the forearm of every human being.*

It's powered by micro pulses from the user's brain. No need for batteries.

A simple tap on your skin, and the universe's database of knowledge is at your disposal.

You can also broadcast yourself to others.

In the early part of the twenty-first century, the same people would have owned ridiculous devices such as "smart" phones (#irony, as the same imbeciles might have joked at the time – "smart") and ghastly contraptions called tablets. Rectangular pieces of junk that rarely operated properly, if ever.

Thankfully, the only "tablets" users have today are the ones needed to contain their anxiety. We have Large Pharma for that.

God bless Large Pharma.

And God bless Individimedia.

* * *

Jamie and Emily sat in the back of another limousine making its way to the arena.

The back passenger window displayed a news reporter, the smartly dressed man with a powerful voice named Santiago Sibald, in the middle of an Individimedia newscast.

'Tensions between the United States and Russia escalated earlier today when foreign diplomat minister, Viktor Rabinovich, was rushed to hospital after taking ill in a restaurant in Minneapolis Two."

Shaky camera footage showed medicians operating a stretcher

drone into the back of an air ambulance. Viktor lay unconscious on the stretcher with breathing apparatus over his face. The medicians slid their patient into the helicopter and flew away from the concerned onlookers.

“Unconfirmed reports speculate that Rabinovich had been poisoned with a toxic nerve agent,” Santiago continued as the footage wiped away to reveal his face. “If these assertions prove to be true, it could spell disaster for diplomacy between the United States and Russia, and unravel all attempts at peace. For more on this story, make sure you link up to my Individimedia channel. This is Santiago Sibald.”

“Poppet,’ Emily said, swiping the screen shut with her hand. “Pay attention. We’re nearly here.”

Jelly sat in her cage, toying with the bars.

“Mom, look,” Jamie said, pointing at the windshield. The arena, and surrounding fuss, crept into view. “There it is.”

“Oh, wow,” Emily leaned forward and suddenly felt the enormity of the ordeal thunder through her body. “There are thousands of them.”

Remy and his mother reached the doors to the arena and turned around for a final wave.

“Bisoubisou, Bisoubisou,” the crowd chanted the clear favorite contender of the day.

Remy held up the cage for the crowd. Most couldn’t see what lay behind the bars. Only those in the first few rows caught a glimpse of the gray, petrified cat wanting to be whisked away from the commotion.

“Hey,” a blue-haired man shouted from the railings. “Cease this cruelty right now.”

“Oh my,” Dreenagh said to her camera-drone, “What’s going on here? Looks like someone is making a go for Remy.”

The blue-haired man ushered his gang through the crowd and hopped over the railings, waving his placard at them.

“Is that who I think it is?” Dreenagh commentated, truning to the drone. “It looks like Handax Skill. We’re in trouble, now.”

“Bring that animal back here,” Handax threatened Remy.

“No,” the kid shouted in his thick Russian accent, “Leave us alone.”

The crowd went silent as the man held up his placard. The sign on the front contained a picture of the USARIC logo with a red strike through it. Underneath it in big, bold letters read:

P.A.A.C.

People Against Animal Cruelty

The crowd choked with silence as the man reached into his jacket.

"This is an outrage," Handax shot Dreenagh a look of evil, and then turned to his gang. "We will not lie down until USARIC reverses its decision to use animals for space exploration."

"Death to human scum who practice inhumane treatment of animals," screamed a female PAAC member.

She threw her placard to the ground and removed her denim jacket, revealing a vest stuffed with dynamite and wires tightened around her waist. "Good people, we cannot allow this corporate *terriful* practice to affect animals. Free the animals."

The audience froze still, afraid to move. The armed security detail pointed their weapons at them. "Person! Raise your arms in the air and slowly lower yourself to your knees."

"No," the girl gripped her utility chain and threatened to yank it. "We demand satisfaction. Remy Gagarin, you have the facility and audience to do the right thing. In front of all Indivimedia, open the cage and let your pet free. Do the right thing."

Remy, not knowing how to react, turned to his mother for a response. She spat at the floor and lowered her shade-wear down the bridge of her nose.

"Remy, do not listen to them. They are imbeciles."

Contrary to his mother's command, Remy set the cage to the floor. He didn't want to die in a terrorist attack.

"That's right," the girl said with a smile, "Now open the cage—"

"—Person," the main security guard roared, "I repeat, release the chain and put your arms in the air."

Dreenagh's drone zoomed over to the commotion several feet in the air, joining several dozens of others.

Jamie slid his thumb across the back passenger window, activating it.

"Individimedia Zero-oh-Five," Jamie said.

The sheen on the glass sparked and displayed a live feed from the drone. The ticker-tape underneath read "Live From The One Arena, Cape Claudius. Terrorist Siege Underway."

"Mom, look!" Jamie pointed at the screen, sending her mother into a hissy fit of anxiety. "It's that man with the blue hair who gave

us Jelly."

"Driver?" Emily asked.

"Yes?"

"Look at your feed."

"Oh, no. Not *them* again." The driver slammed on the brakes and caught the live feed in the corner of his rear view mirror. "They're always causing trouble."

"What if they find out we entered Jelly in the Star Cat Trials, mom?"

The driver reversed from the road and threw the stick shift into first gear. "What's your son talking about?"

"We got Jelly from PAAC," Emily asked. "I know that man with the blue hair. Does this happen often?"

"Yes, all the time," he chuckled and floored the gas pedal.

"What are you doing? You're not taking us closer to them, are you?"

"Nothing to be worried about."

The female animal rights terrorist realized that Remy would never open his pet's cage. Handax pulled out a pistol, scaring the crowd back a few feet.

"In the name of science and humanity, if you choose not to let animals live in peace, then we want no part of the planet."

He placed the barrel of the gun to his head and threatened to shoot himself.

"Person, please," the security guard said. "We'll save you the bother. Lower your gun."

"The statement needs to be made." The female activist turned to the crowd and then up at the drones. They buzzed around, trying to get a good view of the stand-off. "Do you hear us, USARIC? *You're* responsible for *this*…"

The female protester snarled at the camera and yanked the chain away from her vest.

"Everybody down."

The security guards hit the deck. The crowd did the same, trampling over one another, causing some serious injuries – which surely wasn't PAAC's intention, after all.

KA-SNAP-PAP!

Instead of detonating, several party poppers and harmless incendiaries exploded into the sky, in and out of the hovering drones.

The girl laughed as loud as she could and dropped to her knees.

The fake sticks of dynamite released the pretty array of fireworks into the sky.

The security guards made a beeline for her and scooped her up

from the floor. They escorted Handax off the premises to a wave of whoops and hollers of approval from the crowd.

Dreenagh looked at her camera-drone and breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, you saw it here first.”

“You haven’t heard the last from us,’ Handax yelled as the guards marched him away from the crowd. “Freedom for the animals!”

Jamie and Emily’s limousine rolled up to the red carpet at the front of the arena.

The crowd bent over the railings trying to catch a glimpse of the people inside the car.

“Mom, I’m scared,” Jamie shot her a look and grabbed Jelly’s cage handle.

“Me too, poppet,” she said over Jelly’s whining from within the cage. “But we have to go, right? We can’t very well have the driver turn around and take us back to the hotel, can we?”

Jamie shook his head enthusiastically. “We’re here to win. We’re going to win, aren’t we?”

Emily smiled. She knew she had to fabricate the truth and keep her son’s spirit up.

“Brits? Second to a Russian? We already had one cold war,” Emily snorted and kicked the back door open. “And I’m all for doing it again if they want to mess around with us.”

“Wait,” Jamie called after her as the crowd whistled at her. “What’s a cold war?”

“Doesn’t matter, poppet,” Emily pointed at the crowd behind her, “Bring Jelly out. Let’s show these Americans that victory always begins at *home*.”

Jamie didn’t know what his mother had meant by that, but he trusted her enough to jump out of the car to an adoring crowd.

“We love you, Jamie,” screamed a bunch of similarly-aged American girls from behind the railings.

“Jelly! Jelly! Jelly!”

Dreenagh clapped and whistled along with the crowd. “There she is, little Jelly Anderson all the way from the United Kingdom.”

Jamie marveled at the sheer enormity of the crowd. A first taste of super-stardom which overwhelmed him to the point of hysteria.

“Hello, everybody,” Jamie waved as he and his mother walked along the carpet.

This time, security came running over to greet and escort them. “Mrs Anderson?”

“Ms Anderson, thank you very much,” Emily said, walking alongside them toward the arena doors. “Take us inside, please.”

“Yes, of course,” the security guard walked with her, trying to

remember the name of her contestant. “As soon as you’re in, we need to take, uh…”

“—Jelly, mister?” Jamie corrected him.

“Yes, Jelly,” The guard turned to Emily and ushered her forward. “As soon as we’re through the doors, we’ll get you and your son in makeup. An official will take Jelly to the prep room.”

* * *

A teenage Star Cat Trials official named Lindsey ushered Jamie through a tunnel. He’d been separated from his mother.

“Where are we going?” Jamie asked, suddenly aware that he was on his own.

“We’re going to the main stage. You’ll get to meet the finalists. Won’t that be fun?”

“Why are you talking to me like I’m a child?”

“You are a child, aren’t you?” Lindsey spat, looking up the length of the corridor.

“Yes, but I’m not stupid,” Jamie raced forward, catching up with Lindsay.

“No, of course you’re not.”

The audience hubbub came from behind the walls. It felt like there were at least a million people in attendance.

Anxiety rushed through Jamie’s body. “I want my mom.”

“No, sweetie. She’ll be in the audience. You’ll see her in the family and friends section.” Lindsey clicked a button on her headset. “Approaching door B-Two, now. Are the others ready?”

“Yes, they’re waiting for you, now,” came the response. “Five minutes till show time.”

The stage music and audience commotion grew louder and louder as the pair approached a set of double doors.

Lindsey reached the door handle and grabbed it, shooting him a smile. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Honestly, there’s nothing to worry about,” Lindsey chuckled. She developed a soft spot for the kid right there and then. “We’ll walk in and Gunnar will introduce you all. Just do as he says.”

“Okay.”

The stage doors flew open.

Lindsey and Jamie approached the arena’s central stage to overwhelming applause. Music played amid an array of fireworks.

Jamie looked up and saw his name and nationality on the mega-

screen. He looked at the audience. Most were in pitch darkness due to the colossal stage lamps shining in his eyes from the gods.

"And finally," Gunnar said from under the spotlight, "All the way from the United Kingdom… Jamie Anderson and his contender, *Jelly*."

Another spotlight shone down on Jelly, who sat patiently at the right of the stage. Next to her was Bisoubisou, the Russian Blue. Next to her sat a white American bobtail. Each had a plastic tie around their necks which shackled them to the wall. They were very unhappy about the restriction.

The audience continued their adoration as Jamie made his way to a marked-out area in front of a grid of twenty-four panels, measuring five-by-five feet.

"So, we're down to three. The cream of the crop," Gunnar said over the music as Jamie, Remy and a girl each took their respective grids. "Just two more rounds in the finals of the Star Cat Trials, here we go…"

The music thundered across the arena as the lights dimmed down, forcing everyone to focus on the mega-screen.

Three handlers unfastened the plastic shackles on each cat and carried them over to their respective grids.

THE FINALS

Round One

- Obedience -

A female voice narrated the event as the three kids and their cats prepared to begin the event.

"Each contestant has a grid of twenty-four panels that light up. The owner will use their gears to light up one panel at a time. Each time their cat hits the corresponding panel, they will score one point. Will their pet obey their instruction? Welcome… to *Obedience*…"

Jamie looked at a panel of gears on a machine deck in front of him. He made a face at Remy, who fiddled with his controls in the middle of the three contestant line-up.

"Hey, I'm Jamie."

"I know," Remy said in his Russian accent, trying to ignore the kid. "I saw your name on the screen. Do not talk to me."

"What's your name?"

"Remy."

"Remy, it's very nice to meet—"

"—Do not talk to me. *English*."

Jamie mocked the boy with his face, "Do not look at me."

He looked over at the girl, who sat to Remy's right. "Who's she?"

"I said do not speak to me, English. You must concentrate," Remy nodded at his Bisoubisou. She lifted her paw and waved back, as if on cue. "You ready, Bisoubisou?"

"Meow," she responded, frightened by the impressive arena lights.

Jamie decided to enact the same action with Jelly. "Hey, girl. You ready?"

Jelly didn't say anything as her handler plonked her on the starting grid. No lift of the paw. Jamie felt immediately inferior and wondered why Jelly didn't wave back like Bisoubisou had done with Remy.

Of course, they didn't have *that* kind of a relationship. Remy had clearly done his homework. It pleased the Russian kid no end that the stupid Brit hadn't taken the time to train his own pet.

"Useless, English."

"Shut up," was Jamie's provocative retort.

Gunnar waved his hands and held the microphone to his mouth. "Okay, I think the contenders are ready."

A dramatic game show-like synthesizer replaced the music.

Jamie, Remy, and Leesa's gears lit up.

"And… go!" Gunnar said.

Jamie looked at his controls without the faintest idea what to do. "What do I do?"

Remy looked over and smirked. "Make it up, English."

"Okay, *Russian*," Jamie muttered sarcastically as he hit the first panel on his deck. It lit up and seemed to growl. He lifted his head and nodded at Jelly. "Go on, girl."

She trundled forward and sat in the middle of the grid on the lit panel. It sunk in a few inches and made a "ping' noise, indicating that she'd selected the right one.

The tile turned white under her paws, scaring her. "Meow," she yelped and jumped into the air.

"Good girl," Jamie said to a wave of applause from behind his shoulders.

Remy hit the third panel. Bisoubisou wouldn't move. "Come on, you insolent feline. Move," he instructed her, tapping the button over and over again.

Instead of obliging, she rolled onto her side and licked her paw.

"Ugh, you idiot."

Leesa hit the fifth panel button and looked at Remy.

The boy made a face at her. “What are you looking at?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “Maybe an idiot?”

Ping.

Suzie Q-Two jumped forward and hit the fifth panel with her paws.

It lit up, scaring the life out of her. “Meow!”

“Whoa,” Gunnar chuckled into the microphone, “Okay, it’s between Jelly and Suzie Q-Two. One for one for those two, and Bisoubisou is looking a bit out of her league.”

“No she does not,” Remy thumped the controls and kicked the deck. “This is unfair.”

The crowd erupted in waves of laughter as they watched Bisoubisou lick her paws, completely ignoring her master’s instruction.

“Let’s mix this up a bit,” Gunnar said to the crowd.

“What?” Jamie looked down at his controls. The gears and buttons powered down.

Daft Punk’s *Harder Better Faster Stronger* kicked off through the arena speakers.

“It’s a dance-off!” Gunnar turned and pointed at the grids. “A classic track all the way from the early twentieth century. Here we go.”

Jelly’s head jumped from left to right and up and down as she observed the panels come to life against the beat of the tune.

Bisoubisou jumped to her feet and growled.

Suzie Q-Two did the same and hopped to the first panel, pressing it down.

The buzzer went off, awarding a point to the white bobtail.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Leesa jumped in her seat and applauded her cat. The tiny ball of fluff hopped to the next panel and racked up some more points in tune to the beat. “You go, girl.”

Remy looked at Bisoubisou and clenched his fist. “Commence dancing, you stupid cat.”

Bisousbisou jumped to her feet and raced into the middle of her twenty-four panels. They lit up, one-by-one, in time to the beat. She twisted around and followed the lit panels with her head, whining to herself.

Jamie stood out of his chair and clapped along with the music. Jelly hopped from one panel to the other, collecting points. “Go, go, go.”

The timing of the music intensified, flashing the grid panels even faster.

“Wow,” Jamie marveled at Jelly as she jumped from one to the other. She wasn’t doing a perfect job, however. One particularly difficult jump sent her onto her hind legs and tumbling over onto a

grayed-out panel.

Bzzz.

"Oh. That's an error, right there," Gunnar said into his microphone. "Anderson may lose points for that."

"No!" Jamie yelled from his seat, "It's going too fast. That rubbish olden days music is too quick."

Jelly scrambled to her feet and squealed. Her pupils dilated as she tried to keep up the attack on the flashing panels.

Suzie Q-Two caught up with each panel and totaled over thirty points which displayed on the mega-screen.

"Suzie Q-Two is winning," Gunnar commentated, "But can she keep this up…"

Bisoubisou finally got involved in the event. She jumped from one lit panel to the other with extraordinary grace and ability.

"And we're back in the game," Gunnar said, watching Bisoubisou trashing her opponents.

Suzie Q-Two had a hard time keeping up with her rivals. The panels blinked away even faster against the thrust of the music. Her eyes turned a urine-stained yellow.

"No, Suzie Q-Two!" Leesa screamed, "Don't do that now!"

Her cat shrieked and bushed out her tail. She went into a flying hissy fit and attacked her grid at random, flying into the air. Her tail got in the way.

Bzzz-Bzzz-Bzzz…

The mega-screen showed Suzie Q-Two's points drain away to zero as she hit the wrong panels.

"No, no, no," Leesa started to sob as her cat jumped from her own grid and raced across Bisousbisou's, pushing her out of the way.

"Whoooaaaaa," the crowd roared as they watched Suzie Q-Two hop into Jelly's grid and threaten to attack her as she danced.

Bzzz.

Jelly flipped in the air and clipped Suzie Q-Two around the face with her paw.

The music track crashed to a halt, leaving a flummoxed Jelly catching her breath. Suzie Q-Two rolled around on her belly and licked her paws.

"I think we'd regard that as a disqualification," Gunnar said.

Leesa's panel buzzed out. The lights on her grid flipped off.

The girl burst into tears, lamenting her cat's disobedience.

A bunch of audience members scrunched up their betting slips and threw them to the ground. "Ugh, absolutely useless," one of them said to his friend.

Leesa looked over her shoulder at her mother and father. They

didn't know how to respond.

"Sorry, honey."

"It's not fair," she bawled back at them.

The three cat handlers ran onto the three grids. Lindsey lifted Jelly into her arms as the crowd made a fuss over her.

"Jelly, Jelly, Jelly," they chanted over and over.

It hadn't gone unnoticed by Jamie that the largely American crowd were not in favor of the British cat winning over-and-above the Russian contender.

Remy was riled up by this fact.

"Let's look at the final scores, please," Gunnar held his hand up to the mega screen.

The numbers whizzed around and settled on the final result.

Obedience – Final Scores

J. Anderson = 42 pts
B. Gagarin = 40 pts

Remy face-palmed himself and sat into his chair in utter disbelief. "Nooooo."

"Yes," Jamie punched the air and waved at Jelly as Lindsey carried her back to her box. "Way to go, Jelly."

Emily whistled from the family and friends audience section, catching her son's attention.

"Mom, we're winning!"

"I know, poppet," Emily giggled, excitedly, "Just one more round to go."

Gunnar stepped forward as the tiled grids spun around on their axis and sank into the floor.

"Could the contenders please visit their pets one final time and prepare for the final round."

Remy and Jamie jumped out of their seats and raced each other to the two cages at the right of the stage.

Lindsey held out her arms in an attempt to prevent the boys from getting too close. "Wait a second, guys."

Jamie watched as a technician lifted Jelly out of her cage and slipped a device onto Jelly's right paw.

Bisoubisou received the same treatment from another technician.

Both cats had a lightweight glove clamped to their right paw.

"What's going on?" Jamie asked.

Lindsey explained over the commotion coming from the restless crowd. “It’s a special device they need for the final round.”

Remy approached the deck and eyed the device attached to his cat’s right paw. “What is it?”

“Watch, up there.”

Jamie and Remy turned around and looked up at the screen.

The lights died down, focusing the audience’s attention on the screen.

Footage of a cat’s paw flashed up. A human hand slipped on a set of metal ridges that ran over the cat’s own claws.

“The final round,” the female narration played out. “Infinity Claws. The ultimate test of strength, character and… *combat*.”

The screen displayed record footage of several cats in a one-on-one, swiping at each other with their infinity claw gloves.

“No, no,” Remy moved forward trying to stop the proceedings. “They’re sharp. It will hurt them.”

“Oh no,” Lindsey whispered to the boys under the loud music playing on the footage, “It’s perfectly safe. These claws are designed to *not* cause injury. If they were using their real claws, it would.”

“So they’re like Jitsaku gloves?” Jamie asked.

“Yes, they’re a bit like boxing gloves,” Lindsey turned to Jelly and Bisoubisou. The latter sank her teeth into the contraption and tried to tear it off her paw – to little success.

“I do not like this,” Remy said. “Look, it upsets her.”

Jamie agreed, although Jelly didn’t seem to mind her new toy as much as her opponent. She sniffed around as she operated her new “claws’, winding them in and out.

Jamie clapped his hands, attracting Jelly’s attention. She looked back at him, failing to emote. Her face displayed a steely, determined expression. At least that’s what it looked like to Jamie.

He walked over to her and ran his hand across the top of her head. She head-butted him back and purred.

“We’re going to win. Aren’t we, girl?”

Jelly rubbed the side of her face along his palm and purred. She may as well have just said “Hell, yeah,” judging by her response.

Bisoubisou, on the other hand, found her new glove very uncomfortable.

Remy folded his arms and stared at her. “Bisoubisou?”

She stopped fussing and looked right at her owner.

“Do not ruin this for me, you understand?”

As Remy finished his sentence, the combat zone lit up behind him to a ravenous audience. He and Jamie turned to face the area together, surprised at the layout.

The zone measured ten by ten feet. The left half colored in red,

the right half in blue.

A ten foot cage surrounding all four walls.

"Oh, wow…" Jamie muttered. "That's insane."

"Okay, guys," Lindsey said. "Let's get ready…"

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Round

- Combat -

Lindsey carried Jelly in her arms to the hole in the caged combat zone. She pushed her through and wiped her palms down on her pants.

Jelly couldn't get out. She raced up to the western side of the metal railings in an attempt to approach Jamie.

The railing sparked, threatening to zap her if she touched it. An electrified fence. She couldn't get out.

Jelly whined and ducked her head, deeply unimpressed.

"Not now, girl," he whispered, "Look. All these people watching. You made it to the finals."

Jelly spun around and whipped her tail around, purposely showing him her behind.

"That's not nice. How would you like it if I did that to you?"

Jelly lifted her right paw and attempted to claw at the cage, teasing the electricity out.

"No, don't do that—"

Zap.

"—Meow," Jelly yelped and jumped back. A whiff of singed fur wafted around Jamie's immediate vicinity.

An angry growl from Bisoubisou in the blue half forced her to turn around.

The house lights in the arena drew to a close. Two flood lamps illuminated the combat zone.

Blue streaks of electricity shot across the metal railings. The ground began to rumble as a high-pitched whine flew across the stage.

"Good people," announced the female voice, "Welcome to the final of the Star Cat Trials. In the red left corner, representing the United Kingdom… Jelly Anderson."

A shower of fireworks burst around the western red half of the combat zone, scaring Jelly into a huddle of tense nervousness.

The crowd cheered and chanted, "Jell-ee! Jell-ee!"

Remy folded his arms in a huff, trying block out the audience's love for his opponent.

Bisoubisou tumbled around, clawing at her metal "glove' in a

desperate bid to remove it.

"And her opponent in the blue corner, hailing from Russia, Bisoubisou."

The crowd were less than enthusiastic about the Russian Blue currently occupying the blue half. Angered, Remy held up his middle finger to the crowd, which only made them eager for his team to lose.

"*Combat* combines the disciplines of Jujitsu and Kung Fu," Gunnar said into the drone camera at the edge of the stage. "Jitsaku is the name of the game in *Combat*. In just a few minute's time, we'll have a winner, won't we?"

Aggressive music started up, suggesting that the action wasn't far away.

Gunnar raised his hand. "Let's begin!" He walked over to his podium and pushed a lever forward. "Zero gravity, ready."

The crowd fell silent as the combat railings vibrated, jolting hundreds of thousands of volts through the metal girders.

Jelly's paws lifted slowly from the ground as weightlessness set in. Scared, she revolved in the air, trying to hold on to something to stop her from levitating.

She nearly hit the railing, but remembered the electric shock that would occur if she did. Her claws retracted and, instead, pushed forward, tossing her around in mid-air.

Bisousbisou went wild with fear. She tried to catch her tail as it drifted in front of her eyes.

"No, girl," Remy screamed, "Get upright and get ready to fight."

Bisoubisou squealed in terror, wondering just what the heck was going on.

An audience member turned to his friend, munching on a bucket of popcorn. "Cats doing Jitsaku?"

"Yeah, really," his friend snorted.

"That's a bit stupid, isn't it?"

"Nah, they're dressing it up as Jitsaku," another man sitting near them interrupted, "They're probably gonna just scrap like they usually do."

"Welcome to Combat," announced the female voice, "One strike equals one point. There is only one round. There will only be *one* winner… who will become USARIC's *Star Cat*?"

The music crashed to a halt.

Jelly and Bisoubisou floated in the air, ready to attack each other. It wasn't because they had to fight, but because they felt the desire to kill.

And they caught that desire from being holed up in an electrified

cage. Everyone knew it. Only the Anderson and Gagarin family seemed to care.

Jamie knew that the setting was designed to provoke the animals. It was the first time in his life that he took exception to something that didn't directly involve him. Sure, he'd been hurt before – and experienced injury – but this particular event felt incredibly unethical. He didn't even know what unethical meant, but he was sure that a decent example of it stood before him.

"Here we go, guys," Gunnar said, "Let's *Combat*!"

A buzzer sounded off. The central section of the cage shot down, allowing the two cats to go at each other.

Bisoubisou wasted no time.

She threw her gloved paw forward, hurtling the rest of her body through the air.

Bisoubisou took a swipe at Jelly's face and narrowly missed. She tumbled back-first against the electrified railing and felt a wave of electricity shudder down her spine.

"Meeoooooww," Jelly floated back. Her hind legs hit the floor, providing her with an opportunity to push herself toward her rival.

Jelly threw her claws forward and latched onto the spinning Bisoubisou. The two tussled in mid-air, gnawing and gnashing away at each other.

Jelly sank her fangs into Bisoubisou's neck and tore out a clump of fur. A final smack to the head put the Russian Blue out of action for a few moments.

Zaapp-pp.

Bisousbisou's head caught in the railing, jolted by a split-second's worth of electricity. "Raoooowwaar!"

Jelly realized what she had done. She ducked her head and turned herself upside down as Bisoubisou kicked away from the cage.

The lightning bolt rumbled through Bisoubisou's hind legs, causing her fur to stand on end as she rocketed toward Jelly.

"No, no!" Jamie threw his hands into the air and looked at Gunnar. "You're hurting them. Please, stop it."

"They're not hurt, kid," Gunnar giggled. "It's just a bit of a nudge to get them to engage. If they can't handle the action on Earth, how are they going to cope in space if they meet aliens?"

"Aliens?" Jamie asked himself.

Remy punched the air, furious on Bisoubisou's behalf. "Go on, smash her. Kick that orange lump of fur."

Bisoubisou swiped her claw and caught Jelly on the shoulder. The metal hanging over her claws dug into Jelly's fur, causing her to screech out loud.

The exhilaration coming from the audience was palpable.

Ordinarily they'd be cheering, but the violent action taking place caused them to choke. The combat was far more furious – and dangerous – than expected.

"My God!" an audience member stood up and screamed. "This is horrible. Make them stop."

"No, no," Jamie whispered under his breath, looking at Jelly. "Don't stop. Defend yourself, girl."

Swish-swipe.

"Twenty seconds remaining," announced the female voice.

Jelly gave it her best shot. She lifted her hind legs and kicked Bisoubisou in the stomach, pushing her back. "Grrrrr."

Jelly looked at her hind paws and deliberately pressed them against the railings, knowing she'd receive a nasty nip of a shock.

A jolt of electricty blasted through her body.

"Whoa, that's gotta hurt!" Gunnar laughed into the microphone. He looked at the screen. "Jelly's on eight points. Bisoubisou is on seven."

Jelly's hind paws hit the railing. She screamed in pain and saw the bolt of electric blue run up her legs. She pushed forward and revolved around in the air, ready to knock ten shades of hell out of her opponent.

Unfortunately for her, Bisoubisou was ready. Like Jelly, she utilized the anger-induced electric shock with her glove. She pushed back, purposely zapping herself.

Bisoubisou and Jelly stormed head-to-head through the air, ready to obliterate each other.

"This is it!" Gunnar yelled into the microphone. "Ten seconds left."

Jelly meowed at the top of her lungs, raising her infinity claws above her head and ready to smack the hell out of her rival.

Bisoubisou did the same, revealing her sharp, white fangs.

"Six… five… four…" announced the female voice.

Everything seemed to crash into slow motion for Jamie and Remy. They briefly caught each other's eyes as they turned to their pets.

Jelly threw the first punch and grabbed Bisoubisou's face in her claws. She yanked her opponent around as their bodies tumbled over and over together.

Bisoubisou's face tore open as one of Jelly's infinity claws pulled away. It proved to be just the pain that Bisoubisou needed to develop an incandescent rage.

She reached up and socked Jelly in her stomach, sending her tumbling against the metal railing.

"Wooooooooh!" the audience finally exhaled.

Electric sparks blistered out from behind Jelly as her shoulder blades hit the railings. “Mwaahhh.”

“…two… one… and, game over.”

Bzzz. The combat cage collapsed out and folded over itself, sinking into the floor.

Bisousbiou and Jelly were no longer the subject of zero gravity. They shot down to the floor and landed on their paws.

The mega-screen played some of the highlights of both rounds as the totals calculated.

Gunnar and the crowd cheered the two cats as their respective handlers lifted them out of the cage.

Lindsey ran her hand over Jelly’s head and examined her face. “Hey, Jelly. How are you?”

She gnashed her mouth at the woman and tried to claw her face. Clumps of fur had burned away. She was injured and extremely upset.

Remy watched Bisoubisou in his handler’s arms. “Give me her.”

“No,” the handler said, holding the cat in the air for the audience to see. “We need to do this.”

“Give me my cat back,” Remy stomped his foot on the ground. “You hurt her.”

“Okay, everybody,” Gunnar stepped forward and pressed his index finger to his lips. “The results are in. The points have been tallied up. It seems we have a winner.”

The crowd fell silent, as did Jamie and Remy. Everyone turned to the mega screen for the payoff.

“And here are the results…” announced the female voice. “In second place…”

Jamie turned to his mother and bit his lip. She looked at the big screen.

“…Jelly Anderson, from the United Kingdom. With a total of fifty-two points.”

“Huh?” Jamie asked himself, confused. “So if Jelly came in second, then that means—”

“—Yes,” Remy jumped in the air with extreme excitement. “Yes. We won.”

“What?” Jamie stomped his foot to the floor. “That’s not right, Jelly won that!”

Gunnar took Bisoubisou from the handler and held her up. “Attention, people. The winner of USARIC’s Star Cat Project… from the Russian Federation, I give you… Bisoubisou Gagarin!”

The crowd cheered politely but were undoubtedly disappointed.

A thousand lights shone on Bisoubisou and Remy as the celebrations took place.

Deflated and exhausted, Jamie slumped to his knees and accepted the noise of failure into his head. After a few seconds, the adulation for his opponent dampened in his ears and left a permanent scar on his brain.

The crowd escaped from the gantry and flooded the stage, all vying to be the first to pet and congratulate the winner.

Emily jumped onto the stage and made a beeline for Jamie. “Oh, poppet. Come here.”

She scooped him up in her arms and hugged him. He went limp and buried his crying face on her shoulder. “It’s not fair, they tried to hurt them.”

“I know, poppet,” she whispered, “If I had known, I would never have let her take part.”

“I want Jelly,” he sobbed, looking up at Jelly in Lindsey’s arms.

“Not yet, Jamie,” Lindsey said, “We need to make sure she’s okay, and we’ll get her back to you.”

Jamie looked at the crowds surrounding the winner. Remy looked very happy with himself as Dreenagh pushed her wrist into his face and asked him some questions.

His parents looked even happier, proud of their son and his cat.

Of course, Bisoubisou was the center of attention.

A tear rolled down Jamie’s cheek. A rousing experience of failure, and one he’d likely never forget till the day he died.

“I want to go home,” Jamie cried into his mother’s comforting arms, “I don’t like it here—”

“Meoowwwwwww.”

Jamie was interrupted by Bisoubisou lashing out at the crowd from out of nowhere.

Everyone turned to the cat and gasped.

Bisoubisou threw her paws out and chewed at the infinity claw on her right paw, whining and growling.

“Oh, god,” her handler looked at her paw and turned to Gunnar. “She’s bleeding. We need to get her to medical, right now.”

Confused, the crowd stepped back. The cameras on Bisoubisou pointed at her, showing her turmoil and sheer agony on the mega-screen.

“Everybody get back. Now.” Gunnar waved the crowd away. The place fell silent.

Bisoubisou wailed in horror as her fangs dug into the metal, trying to wrench the godforsaken device away from her claws.

Her handler darted off toward the back of the stage, leaving a worried crowd wondering what had happened. Spots of blood lined the stage floor as she carried the injured cat away.

Jamie saw the frantic handler kicked through the stage door, screaming for help…

* * *

The handler barged through another door leading to a backstage medical room.

"Where's Wool? We need her, fast."

Wool ar-Ban, an Iranian lady dressed in a lab coat and glasses, jumped out from behind her desk and joined the handler.

"I'm here, what's wrong?"

She took a look at the ailing gray cat in the handler's arms.

"Oh, no. Quick, over here. Lay her on the bed," Wool said, pressing her finger into her ear. "I need surgery down here, stat. Medicians on standby please attend."

The handler lay her down on her side and burst into tears. "She's going to be okay, isn't she?"

"Please, move out of the way. We need some space," Wool held up Bisoubisou's right arm and nearly lost her temper. "Don't tell me. That stupid combat stuff?"

The handler folded her arms and hugged herself in floods of tears. "Yes."

"Honestly, I *told* them not to infuriate the cats. But would they listen? No."

She reached into her inner pocket and pulled out a small syringe.

Two medicians ran through the door and sprung into actions. One of them pushed an ECG monitor on a trolley over to the bed. She unpacked two pads and fired up the machine.

"Her heart's climbing out of her throat," the other medician said, "Checking pulse."

"One-fifty over one," said the first medician as Wool injected the cat with her syringe. "One fifty-two, one fifty-three…"

"Three emm-gee," Wool tried to keep her composure as she watched Bisoubisou's monitor. Her heart was near exploding. She turned to the battered infinity claw and prised it away with her fingers as carefully as she could. It unfastened in Wool's hand.

"Ugh, got it."

She passed the infinity claw to Bisoubisou's handler. "Please, Wool, tell me she's going to be okay?"

"Stop talking, you stupid woman," Wool fanned the cat's claws apart. "She's lost a lot of blood. Please, let us work."

Bisoubisou's head hit the side of the bed's surface. A rope of saliva collected out and bled along her cheek.

“God, no,” Wool said, “She’s going into septic shock.”

The heart rate sped up on the screen.

“Laceration at oh-one-five,” Wool prodded Bisoubisou’s stomach and felt along her chest, keeping an eye on the screen. The cat’s tongue slipped out from her mouth and hung down her face.

“God, no, no,” the first medician said, “She’s gone into shock.”

“Another at oh-two-six, and five-oh-three.”

“Morphine, Doctor?” asked one of the medicians as Wool rubbed her face in a frantic attempt to save the cat’s life.

“No,” Wool said, “She’s had enough—”

Bisoubisou croaked and let out a fountain of vomit. Her right paw had swelled up beyond recognition. Her rightmost claw lilted and threatened to come free.

Her breathing gradually slowed down to nothing.

A clump of fur fell off her chest as she exhaled for the final time.

“It’s the claw,” Wool thumped the table and held her fist to her mouth, trying not to emote. “Nu-huh, no.”

Bisoubisou flatlined.

Wool closed her eyes and took a deep breath, suppressing the urge to cry. She wanted to kill someone for what had happened to the beautiful Russian Blue cat laying before her.

The constant beep signaling the cat’s death was the only thing anyone could hear.

“You call it,” Wool said, looking away.

“Four-fifteen,” the first medician set Bisoubisou’s lifeless paw on the bed. “Wool?”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she kept looking away, silently cursing the day she signed on to the project.

“Wool?” the first medician asked. “Would you like me to notify the bereaved?”

“No, it’s okay.” She looked at her colleague and blinked. “I’ll do it. This is all my damn fault anyway.”

“But didn’t she pass the assessment?” the first medician asked.

“Doesn’t matter if she did or didn’t,” the second medician said, “It doesn’t test for allergies to company product.”

The handler cried in the corner, regretting her involvement in the proceedings.

“Oh, stop crying,” Wool thumped her desk and took no pity on the woman. “You’re just the lackey. You didn’t do anything wrong, so shut up and stop crying. Go back out on stage and look pretty.”

Jamie and Emily sat in the back of the limousine en route to their hotel.

Jelly rested in her carry case between them taking a well-earned

nap. She'd survived the day very well. Much like the limousine's engine, her purring rumbled away from within now that she was on her way home.

Jamie stared out of the window.

The beach front at Cape Claudius whizzed by. Children and their families enjoyed the sun and ocean, offering him a glimpse of what life might have been like had he been born in South Texas.

A giant rig loomed in the background. It would house the spacecraft someday soon and lunch it into the stars.

Alas, the Anderson family would never be involved. Jamie bit his lip and sat back in his seat.

"I'm glad we're going home, mom."

"Yes, poppet," Emily looked at Jelly through the bars of the cage. "Perhaps it's better this way—"

The driver's forearm started ringing. He lifted it to his face and took the call as quietly as possible.

"She did well, though, didn't she?"

Emily didn't say anything. She felt sorry for her son, but they'd achieved more in the past few months than most ever did in their entire lifetimes.

"Yes, poppet," she whispered. "Jelly did very—"

The car screeched to a halt, kicking dust into the air. The traffic from behind slammed their brakes and blared their horns.

Jelly's cage slipped forward. Jamie caught it in his hands before it fell to the foot well.

"What are you doing?"

Emily held her hands out and pressed the back of the driver's seat, shielding herself from colliding with it. "What's going on?"

The driver looked over his chair and threw the stick in reverse.

"I've just had an update," he said, "We're heading back to the arena…"

"What?" Jamie asked. "Why?"

"Actually, we're heading to USARIC, not the arena."

"What?" Emily asked. Why?"

"Something has happened," the driver performed a hasty three-point turn in the middle of the road, angering a lot of the neighboring drivers. "USARIC want to talk to you very urgently."

* * *

Emily, Jamie, and the caged Jelly found themselves in USARIC's main conference room.

They'd been hurried into the building via the back entrance to

avoid the crowds milling around the front.

The Gagarin family had won the trials. As far as they were concerned, Bisoubisou was recuperating with Wool ar-Ban and her team.

Emily caught sight of the attention Remy and his family received as they drove past. No one was any the wiser to the clandestine meeting that took place between USARIC and the Anderson family.

Maar Sheck and Dimitri Vasilov were in attendance, along with Tripp Healy and Wool ar-Ban.

They updated Emily on the events that had taken place after the finals were finished. It came a complete shock, and didn't go down very well with either her or her son.

"How did it happen? Emily asked.

Wool sat up in her chair with a degree of solemnity. "A combination of her injuries and a reaction to the utility that was strapped to her paw. Essentially, it culminated in progressive organ failure and she went into cardiac arrest. She wouldn't have felt anything. It all happened so fast."

Emily exhaled and looked at her lap. She felt disgusted with herself. "It was Jelly's fault, wasn't it?"

"Oh no, no," Wool said, "Jelly had nothing to do with—"

"—we saw it with our own eyes," Emily interrupted. "You made them fight. We saw Jelly injure her. She can't have helped."

"No," Wool said, "I can't argue with that. She can't have helped."

"So, how much trouble are we in?" Emily rubbed Jamie's knee, signing that she had everything under control. "Just so you know, we intend to get representation in court. We can't be held responsible—"

"—in court?" Maar asked, confused. "Why would you need a lawyer?"

"Well, because of all this. You're suing us, aren't you?"

Maar and Dimitri looked at each other, realizing that the woman had gotten the wrong end of the stick. Maar spoke slowly, intending to correct her.

"Uh, no… we're not planning to sue you."

"No?"

"No. Actually, we want to use Jelly. We consider her to be the winner in all this."

"I beg your pardon?"

Jamie's ears pricked up. He felt an internal whirl of delight. "You mean Jelly won?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Tripp looked at Emily and threw her a smile. "Bisoubisou can't go. But Jelly can, if you allow it."

Emily shook her head instinctively. She didn't want to hear

another word.

"No, no, no, you don't get to do this to us. To Jelly. No, a thousand times no."

"How about two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand times *yes*?" Dimitri tried.

"You can't seriously be suggesting that Jelly take Bisoubisou's place?"

"That *is* what we're suggesting," Dimitri glanced over at his colleagues. "Jelly, here, proved a number of things. One, she's the best candidate for the task. Two, she technically *beat* the competition. It's just a shame that the results were announced before—"

Emily slammed the table, her emotions get the better of her. Jelly growled in her cage as she felt the impact.

"You *forced* our cat to attack her. She had no choice. Jelly was defending herself. How *dare* you suggest she's a killer."

"We didn't say she was," Maar said. "All we're saying is that, technically, she won."

"I've heard enough," Emilly grabbed her son's hand and the handle on Jelly's carry case. "We're leaving. Let us out."

She marched Jamie toward the door, leaving a thoroughly disappointed USARIC team behind her.

Just one, last baiting technique was left to be dealt by Maar. "Of course, if Jelly won, which she did, then that also means her family won the prize money."

Emily stopped before the door and closed her eyes. "What?"

Maar rose from his seat. "Perhaps my colleague wasn't clear enough a moment ago. The two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollar final prize," Maar grinned behind her back, much to Dimitri's amusement. "It's all yours. You won."

Emily paused for a second longer and thoroughly digested this new dilemma. She had two options available to her.

1: Uphold her and her family's dignity and walk away. Sure, they'd be broke. Jamie wouldn't get out of Chrome Valley and lead a life worth living. Back to a life of obscurity. Or…

2: She could accept. The money would at least go some way to dampen the effect of the issues raised on point one. It might afford them opportunities in life.

Of course, Emily settled on the latter of the two options. But some caveats she'd yet to think of would need to be put in place.

Emily turned around and made sure they saw her displeased reaction. "The money?"

"That's right, *Emily*," Maar said. "It's yours."

"Right."

She walked back to the conference desk with Jamie.

“Mom, what are we doing?”

“Be quiet, poppet,” she said, sitting into her seat and pressing her hands together. “I will allow Jelly to take part on two conditions.”

“We are all ears,” Dimitri said, suppressing the urge to smile at USARIC’s impending victory.

“The money. Half of it is to be transferred directly into a secure fund for my son when he reaches eighteen.”

“Mom?”

“Hush, poppet.” She turned to Maar and Dimitri for an answer.

“Of course, as you wish.”

“Okay,” Emily continued, “Two. You go out there right now and tell that poor family what happened to their pet.”

This is a condition USARIC did *not* want to entertain. Maar leaned forward and pleaded with her. “The Gagarin family are under the impression Bisoubisou is alive and well and a part of the Opera Beta mission.”

“I don’t care. Do you understand?” Emily said, defiantly, “If you want Jelly, you will go out there and tell that little Russian boy that his cat died because of you… *and* us.”

“Are you out of your tiny English mind?” Dimitri yelped. “Emily, I beg you to reconsider.”

“And stop calling me *Emily*,” she fumed, wondering why the men in the room weren’t using formal address. “You don’t know me. We’re not on first-name terms.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you, but—”

“—Stop talking. I don’t want your apologies.”

Emily took a moment to catch her breath and calm down, much to the consternation of those in the room.

“That’s the offer,” she said. “I want proof of them having been told. I can be there with you if you like, but I need to know you did it.”

“One moment, please,” Maar said.

He and Dimitri whispered to each other, holding their hands over their mouths.

Emily tried to catch on to what they were saying, but their conversation was surreptitious to a fault.

Wool and Tripp looked away from Emily and, instead, smiled at Jamie.

“Looking at my son won’t do any good, mate,” she said to Tripp. “This condition isn’t up for negotiation.”

Wool tried for a smile. “You do know that if Jelly joins us on the mission to Saturn, she’ll be an instrumental part in deciphering the first extra-terrestrial message we’ve ever received. It could be a life changing event.”

“Saturn?” Jamie blurted. “She’s going to Saturn?”

“I’m sure it will be a life-changing event,” Emily smiled back at her, though somewhat angrily. “Let’s hope your bosses make the right decision.”

Maar and Dimitri adjusted their ties and cleared their throats. “We have decided on a compromise.”

“It’d better be good.”

“We *will* inform Remy and his family of what happened to his cat. But we would rather keep this update hidden from the public.”

“Fine by me. I don’t care about the public,” Emily said, somewhat satisfied. “All I care about is them being told.”

“Relations right now between our two countries are not exactly strong, despite our confederacy,” Dimitri said. “We are trying to strengthen our relationship and abide by the 2085 Bering Treaty. If word gets out that a Russian citizen died during this process, it could start a second cold war.”

“So, you’ll tell them?”

“Yes,” Maar said, “And as far as everyone is concerned, Bisoubisou is alive and well and a member of the crew of Space Opera Beta. No one will know that Jelly took her place. We pay the Gagarin family for their silence, and pay you for your participation—”

“—and everybody is happy,” Dimitri finished.

A sense of satisfaction settled across the table.

Emily looked through the bars of Jelly’s carry case. The cat looked back at her and licked her mouth.

“I suppose that suits us,” Emily said, taking a final glance at the team. “It looks like you’ve got yourselves your first cat in space.”

“I guess that’s excellent,” Maar said. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Everyone stood up from their chairs and tucked them under the table. Business had been conducted, and USARIC and the Anderson family were happy.

“Mom?”

“What, poppet?”

“Does this mean Jelly is going, after all?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“So, here’s what will happen next,” Tripp said, “We’ll take delivery of Jelly tomorrow morning. We’ll message the papers to your hotel so you can peruse them and return them to us tomorrow, all signed and sealed. Sound good?”

“Sounds good,” Emily said.

Tripp walked over to Jamie and squatted in front of him. “And tomorrow, we can give you a little tour of Space Opera Beta. Show you where Jelly’s going to spend the next few years.”

“Oh, wow,” Jamie jumped on the spot. “Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s the least we can do,” Tripp said. “Look, I promise you, Jamie. Jelly is going to be fine. And I’d like to introduce you to every one who’ll be working with her.”

Tripp did a great job of reassuring Jamie. It meant the world to Jamie’s mother.

CHAPTER SIX

USARIC Headquarters

Cape Claudius

“Welcome to the United States and Russian Intergalactic Confederation.”

The USARIC logo, a dead-mix of fifty-two stars and a hammer, spun around on its axis in the middle of the room. Random footage of planets orbiting the solar system, happy families and astronauts working on IMS zipped around it.

“For the past quarter-century, USARIC has been searching the outer reaches of our galaxy. Exploring the depths of civilization and strengthening the lives of all its citizens. We hope you enjoy your visit. May your day be productive and full of vigor.”

Jamie mired at the screen, holding Jelly in her carry case. “I can’t believe we’re actually here.”

Emily tugged his sleeve and nodded at the double doors. “I think that’s them.”

“Ah, hello. Emily,” Tripp held out his hand to shake.

Emily smiled, finding it hard to ignore his pulchritude. The man was good-looking, to be sure, but this was pure business. She remained as professional as she could.

“Good after-morning, captain.”

“Oh, I’m not the captain,” Tripp explained, “I’m second-in-charge, Commander Healy.”

“I see,” Emily finally looked him up and down. “I have to ask, what does your wife think about you spending years away from home?”

“She’s used to the idea. It’s part and parcel of the business, I’m afraid,” Tripp smiled and threw Jamie a sly wink. “S’up, champ?”

“Hello, sir.”

“Jamie, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Jamie, here in the United States we no longer use gender-specific titles.”

“What is that?”

“You know. Titles? You’re too young to remember when everyone called people mister and missus and things like that, right?”

‘No,” Jamie said, “We do that all the time. It’s polite.”

‘Well, it’s the law here now. It’s very rude to assume people’s genders when we—”

Tripp stopped talking when Jelly’s carry case. She revealed her teeth and showed him her behind.

“Huh. Charming,” Tripp stood back up and addressed Jamie. “In our country we use people’s first names so we don’t offend people.”

“That’s weird,” Jamie said in his naivety.

“That’s fine. You Brits talk weird, anyway,” Tripp rubbed his hands together and clocked Jamie and Emily’s visitor badges. “Okay, you’re all signed in?”

“Yes,” Emily said, fighting back the desire to pick up Tripp’s blatant xenophobic remark. “We’re ready.”

“Good stuff,” Tripp turned around and nodded at the receptionist. She hit a button and opened the entrance gates. “Let’s go see the spaceship!”

“Yay,” Jamie skipped forward alongside Tripp.

“*Brits*?” Emily muttered, shook her head and followed behind them. “Pfft. Cheeky git.”

Space Opera Beta

The mother of all space crafts. Beautiful and elegant, almost prestigious-looking. The cone-shaped vessel stood upright on its thrusters, pointing at the sky. There was no denying its profound uniqueness in relation to its sister space crafts.

The sheer size of its structure impressed Jamie as he, Tripp and Emily walked along the airstrip to the scaffolding keeping the ship in place.

A couple of fighter jets, military personnel and technicians littered the runway, performing checks on various vehicles.

The back of Jamie’s head hit his neck, so tall was the structure of the cone-shaped craft. “Wow, is that the spaceship?”

“Yes, this is Space Opera Beta,” Tripp said. “How tall do you reckon it is?”

“It’s massive. It’s like a skyscraper but, like an ice cream cone skyscraper.”

“Ha, very true. It’s nearly one thousand feet, end to end. About the length of the Eiffel Tower. Do you know what that is?”

Jamie shook his head as they kept walking.

“It’s that triangle-shape building in Paris, France. It’s really big. It’s sort of the same shape, really?”

“Yes, but it looks like a white, upside-down ice-cream cone.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Tripp wondered aloud, finally able to see the

ship through the eyes of a child. “You’re quite right.”

Emily was impressed, also, but tried not to display her wonder. “It’s pretty good, I suppose.”

“You *suppose*?” Tripp approached the landing gantry that led to the opening at the base of the spaceship. “Suppose nothing, honey. This is absolutely amaziant. Wait until you see inside.”

The view from Jelly’s cage was less impressive. She saw the ship through several plastic bars. The edges of her cage meant she couldn’t grasp the enormity of the vessel. Then again, she was only a cat after all, and it didn’t matter as much.

Jamie felt the need to hold her up so she could get a better view of her new home for the foreseeable future..

“Look, girl. This is all for you.”

Jamie and Emily entered the spacecraft. Tripp jumped up and down on the grille on the floor, trying to prove a point.

“Know what’s underneath here?”

“No,” Jamie said, “What is?”

“The thrusters. The back of the cone is effectively one huge blaster that makes the spaceship go forwards and backwards.”

“Like a big fire?” Jamie asked.

“Sure.”

A slightly overweight man with glasses, Captain Daryl Katz approached the trio. In his fifties, he sported a withered face that had seen many a flight in his time.

“Well, here’s the captain,” Tripp said. “Why not ask him?”

“And who do we have here, Commander Healy?” Katz asked in his thick Texan accent. He shook Emily’s hand.

“This is Jamie Anderson and his mother, Emily. And their cat, Jelly.”

Katz pressed his hands to his knees and took a good look at her through cage’s bar. “Cute little thing, ain’t she? Coochie-coo, oh, you’re cute, aren’t you? Yes, yes… *yeeeeees*… you *are*.”

The others sniggered as Katz spoke to her in a silly voice.

“Mister?”

“You can call me captain, champ,” Katz said, adjusting his spectacles.

Jamie looked at the strange object on his face. They had no lenses in them.

“What’s that thing covering your eyes, captain?”

“Oh these,” Katz slid them off his face and showed them to the boy. “They’re called glasses. People used to wear them decades ago.”

“Why?” Jamie took them and put them over his face. “They look silly.”

“Well, in the old days folk were born with eyes that didn’t see so good. So they needed to wear these to help them see better.”

“Weird,” Jamie decided he didn’t like the antiquated gadget and handed them back.

Katz admired the unusual device for a moment and thought about his past. “Ah, they’re more for decoration, really. They remind me of my grandfather. He used to wear them.”

Tripp chuckled to himself. “I was just about to explain to young Jamie, here, how the thrusters work.”

“Ah, the thrusters,” Katz put his glasses back on and looked at the fat-end of the ship. “Gaseous core nuclear engines. Powerful stuff, but the ol’ girl gets the job done, don’t it?”

“What is *gassy binocular*?” Jamie asked, unsure if he’d heard the man correctly.

“Nuclear engines, Jamie,” Katz banged the side of the vessel. “Kinda like tiny nuclear bombs that get thrown out the back and blast the spaceship to where it needs to go.”

“Wow,” Jamie blinked at the captain. “Sounds powerful.”

“It sure is,” Katz walked along the corridor and waved his hands. “The bombs create a ripple in the fabric of space and Opera Beta can surf on them to get where it needs to go much faster.”

“Yeah,” Jamie nodded, enacting the thoughtful scientist he’d want to become. “Surfing is cool.”

“Cool? It’s positively *chilling*, young man,” Katz chuckled at the child’s wonder at the information. “Speaking of which, the whole outside of the ship is made of ceramic. The heat shields are made of it, too, to protect the crew.”

“What is that?” Jamie asked, “Ceramic?”

“It’s kinda like what your dinner plates are made from. You know when you take your dinner out of the microwave, and the plate isn’t as hot as the food?”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, like that. All the older spaceships didn’t have it, and the people inside got very hot. But the clever scientists at USARIC figured out a way to modify its structure. It’s lightweight and heat retardant, and works well.”

Jamie sniggered to himself, hoping not to get caught.

“What’s so funny, young man?”

“Nothing,” Jamie wiped his mouth and tried to stop laughing.

“Naw, c’mon,” Katz said. “Spit it out?”

“You said *retard*.”

“Eh?”

Katz looked at Tripp for answer. All he got was an “I dunno” shrug of the shoulders.

“Did I say that?”

Tripp pushed through to the next point of interest.

“Aww, no,” Katz finally caught on, “I said retardant, not *retard*. Though, I guess they mean the same thing…”

The door to the armory slid open.

Jaycee, dressed in his threatening exo-suit, inspected a variety of weapons.

“Ah, Jaycee,” Katz said, “We have a guest. Thought you’d like to meet them?”

Jaycee stood up from the bench and lowered the machine gun in his hands. As he stepped forward, the room rumbled back and forth under his heavy mechanical suit and footwear.

He saluted Jamie and smiled at his mother. “Yes.”

“Jamie, this is Jaycee Nayall,” Katz tapped Tripp on the back, “He’s in charge of the armory on the spaceship. I’m afraid I have to go and run some last-minute checks. I’ll leave you in the company of my second-in-command.”

“Bye, sir.”

Katz winked at him and pointed at Jelly’s cage on the way out. “Cute cat, by the way. Looking forward to working with her.”

Tripp looked up at Jaycee and made some small talk. “Jaycee? Wanna tell the kid about yourself?”

“Sure,” Jaycee slung the machine gun over his shoulder and pulled out a pistol. “This here is the Rez-9.” He dropped the clip into his palm, satisfied that the chamber was empty.

“Here, wanna hold it?”

“Okay.”

Emily watched her son take the gun in his hand and aim it at the lockers on the wall.

“Careful where you point that thing, Poppet,” Emily turned to Jaycee. “Sorry, we don’t have guns back home.”

“I know,” Jaycee sniggered, “And look where that’s gotten you.”

Emily ignored his pithy remark and turned her head.

“Bang,” Jamie pretended to shoot the locker door, having the time of his life. “Wow, I love this. Can I keep it?”

“Oh, no, no,” Jaycee grabbed the gun from out of his hands and slipped it back into his belt. “It’s not a toy, it’s very dangerous. It’ll disintegrate every molecule in your body if you’re not careful.”

Tripp snapped out of his daydream and saw that Emily wasn’t impressed with the armory.

“Hey, thanks, Jaycee,” he said. “I think we’ll move on, now. Time is of the essence.”

“Any time.”

“Follow me,” Tripp pressed his palm against the panel on the wall. The door slid open, allowing him and Emily through.

Jamie approached the door and turned back to look at Jaycee. He placed his left boot on the workbench and tied his shoelaces.

“He looks really sad,” Jamie muttered.

“So, this is the main passageway that connects all the different areas of the ship. We call it the hub?”

Tripp pointed at various protrusions coming from the corridor walls.

Pipework.

Fuse boxes.

Connected strip lights that shot into the foreground, illuminating the shiny linoleum-esque flooring.

“What is a hub?” Jamie asked.

“It’s like a central point for people to meet. No point showing you that as it’s just a big meeting room. Pretty boring.”

Tripp turned a corner and made his way to the medical facility.

“Okay, this one is cool,” Tripp approached the door. “This is Wool’s office. You remember her, right?”

“Yes, the brown lady?”

“Yeah,” Tripp spat. “The *brown* lady. Jelly’s new carer.”

The three of them made their way into the area.

“It’s like a hospital in here,” Emily said, sniffing around.

“Welcome to Medix,” Tripp looked around the tables and beds for his colleague. “USARIC has some of the highest-trained medicians on the planet. Wool is the best one we have.”

He moved forward and looked over at her computer desk. “Wool, are you here?”

Jamie was fascinated by the beds. One in particular, a much smaller structure, sat at the far end of the room. A drip lay next to it, along with a small monitor on a metal tray.

“This looks like an animal bed?” Jamie said. “It’s too small for a person.”

“Yes,” a familiar voice came from behind Jamie. “It’s exclusively for Jelly.”

Wool ar-Ban approached the trio with a great big smile.

“Hi, Wool,” Jamie said.

“Hey, Jamie,” she said, “Hello Ms Anderson.”

“Hi.”

“Before we go on, I’d like to apologize for what happened yesterday,” Wool said, shaking Emily’s hand. “It was very unfortunate, but I can assure you that it’s not symptomatic of USARIC’s usual handling of things.”

“That’s okay,” Emily said, “It’s not for my benefit. It’s for my son. He loves space and spaceships and stuff like that.”

“Yes, so I hear,” Wool smiled at Jamie and held out her hands. “So, this is my area of the ship.”

Jamie looked around, impressed. “You’re a doctor?”

“No, I’m a medician.”

“You do magic tricks and stuff?”

“No, not a magician. I’m a medician.”

“What is that?”

“I’m a veterinarian and general practitioner for human beings.”

“Why are you brown?” Jamie asked in his infinite naivety. “Are you Indian?”

Wool burst out laughing and shook her head. “Gosh, no. Whatever makes you think that?”

“You’ve got brown skin like an Indian.”

“No, I’m half Iranian,” Wool said in her perfect American accent. “My father was Iranian and my mother was American. And you’re English, right?”

“Yes.”

“And where’s your father?”

Jamie shrugged his shoulders and lifted Jelly’s case into the air. “He’s in heaven, now.”

Emily looked away from Wool and bit her lip. Her son’s somewhat emotionless remark hit her right in the gut. It wasn’t the woman’s fault she’s asked such an unfortunate question.

Wool caught on immediately and turned the emotional tables around. “I’ve heard her name is Jelly?”

“Would you like to meet her?” Jamie asked.

“Sure. Put her on her bed and we’ll take a look.”

Jamie plonked the cat’s carry case on the little hospital bed and unclipped the locks.

The cage sprung out, inviting Jelly to freedom. She wouldn’t come out of the case. Wool ducked her head down and looked the cat in eyes. “Hey, girl.”

Jelly ducked her head and looked at her paws.

“C’mon, let’s get you out of there,” Wool reached in and grabbed Jelly under the arms. The cat fought back at first. Once she was in the arms of her new carer, she purred and rather enjoyed the comfort.

“I think she likes me,” Wool said, cradling Jelly in her arms. “Who’s a *good* girl, then?”

“She likes you, Wool.”

“Yes,” she said, stroking the cat’s chin with her knuckle, “She looks very happy. Evidently feels safe with her little engine running.”

“Great stuff,” Tripp approached his colleague and held her

shoulder. “We don’t have much time, and I’d like Jamie to meet everyone.”

“Oh, sure,” Wool offered Tripp Jelly to carry. “You want to take her, commander?”

“Sure, hand her over.”

Tripp took Jelly into his arms and observed her face. “Wow, she really is special, isn’t she?”

“She’s one in a million. Quite literally.” Wool winked at Jamie, who grinned back at her. “Jamie, don’t worry. She’s in safe hands. My job is to look after her, and I intend to do just that.”

“Will you feed her and make sure she gets lots of exercise?”

“Of course, sweetie,” Wool walked back to her computer desk. “Have fun checking out the ship. I’ll make sure you get some screen time with Jelly once we’re out of hyper-sleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

Tripp, Jamie and Emily made their way to the other end of the corridor. A silver screen door lay at the very end.

Tripp crouched down and allowed Jelly out from his arms. “Go on, girl.”

“Wait. Is it safe?” Jamie asked.

“She can only go forwards or backwards. She’ll probably reach the next room before us, anyway. It’s good for her to have a bit of a run around. Get her used to the ship.”

Jelly reached the door to an area named *Botanix*. She scratched at the glass, excited at the playground that lay behind it.

“Where are we going now?” Jamie asked.

“Botanix,” Tripp explained, “It’s the part of the ship that provides us with oxygen and fresh water.”

“How does it do that?”

“You’ll see.”

They reached Jelly, who butted her head against the door. He placed his palm onto the panel on the wall. “Open up.”

It slid open and offered a full view of what Jelly had seen moments ago.

Rows and rows of plants, too varied and numerous to mention. Two powerful lamps shone over them. Silver foil lined the soil as far as the eye could see.

Jamie and his mother were taken aback by just how clean the air was. As expected, Jelly ran up the rows and explored the place for all it was worth.

“Haloo?”

“Hello?” Jamie asked. “What?”

“No, Haloo,” he said, “My colleague.”

A young woman hosed the second row of plants and spotted her new visitors entering the room. She saw the cat weaving in and out of the plants.

"Hey, guys. Is that our winner poking around my geraniums?" Haloo asked.

"Yes, that's Jelly."

"Huh," Haloo watched her rummage away at the soil. "Gonna have to keep an eye on her, then."

"My name is Jamie Anderson. I'm Jelly's *human*," he said, offering his hand.

Haloo smirked and took the kid's hand in hers. "Nice to meet you. I'm Haloo Ess. Opera Beta's botanist."

"Botanist?"

"Yes, I look after the plants."

"Cool," Jamie threw her hand away and ran after Jelly. "Hey, girl, come back here."

Emily and Tripp chuckled as they watched Jelly sneak around the plants trying to hide from her master.

"Hey, Tripp. Did we get those new purifiers I ordered?"

"I'm not sure. I'm about to have Baldron, our new engineer, and the other new guy check it. I forget his name."

"Tor, I think."

"Right, that's him," Haloo smiled at Emily. "Hey, congratulations on winning, by the way. A real honor to be working with your… *cat*. Jelly?"

"Yes, Jelly," Emily said. "Is she really going to be *the first*?"

"Yes, she is. Is there anything you'd like to ask while you're here? You can ask anything."

Emily looked around and took in the sheer height of the room. At least thirty-feet tall. "This is really impressive. So, all this provides all the oxygen you need?"

"Yes, it's a cyclical process. As long as us humans, and, uh, *felines*, keep on producing carbon dioxide, the plants continue to generate oxygen and provide fresh water."

Haloo nodded over at the far end of room. "The room is hermetically sealed when not in use, so CO2 levels remain constant. God forbid we ever have a fire in here."

"Why?"

"The place would go up in an instant, so the entire place is fireproof. Bombproof, actually."

"Well, that is reassuring," Emily looked over at Jamie and Jelly playing around in the plants. "Hey, guys. C'mon, don't disrupt the lady's work area."

"Oh, they're fine."

Jamie scooped Jelly up in his arms and scrambled over to his mother. “I think she likes this room.”

“I’m not surprised,” Emily said, “Loads of opportunity to hide and trash the place.”

The statement received a knowing chuckle from Tripp and Haloo.

“Okay, I better get back to work,” Haloo said. “The tank needs refilling.”

“Okay.”

Haloo returned to her hose amongst the plants. “Please check on those filters, Tripp.”

* * *

“This spaceship is so big,” Jamie said to Tripp as they made their way to the front of the vessel.

Emily clutched the handle on Jelly’s carry case. She looked through the bars to see that her pet was unhappy. The cat clawed at the bars and whined.

“Hush, Jelly,” Emily said.

“We’re going to meet a very special person,” Tripp walked into the Fit Room.

“Wow,” Jamie took a look around.

Treadmills.

Exercise bicycles.

Rowing machines.

In the corner, a young woman with brunette hair held her fists up at a mannequin. She bounced around on the spot, ready to attack it.

A holograph of a man’s face appeared on the silver head of the mannequin. The woman squinted at it and clenched her right fist.

“Stop looking at me,” she screamed at the mannequin’s face. Her body lifted into the air and roundhouse-kicked the mannequins head. The piece of plastic exploded and bounced off the wall, leaving fine debris remnants to float to the ground.

“Bonnie?” Tripp shouted across the room. “Are you fit?”

She lowered her head and slowed her breathing. “I’m fine,” she said, socking the headless mannequin in the gut in anger.

“Whoa,” Jamie stopped in his tracks, afraid to go anywhere near her. “Who’s she?”

Bonnie twisted her head to the young boy and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Who are you?”

“This is Jamie Anderson and his mother, Emily,” Tripp said.

‘Hi,’ Jamie offered, innocently.

Bonnie took a towel from the wall holder and wiped the sweat

from her brow. “So?”

“Their cat won the Star Cat Project.” Tripp took the carry case from Emily and presented it to Bonnie. “Here she is.”

Bonnie looked through the bars with a blatant nonchalance. “Oh, cool.”

Jelly meowed at her from inside the case. Bonnie’s demeanor changed the moment she clapped eyes on the animal.

“Can I hold her?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Bonnie opened the cage. Jelly relished the opportunity to jump out into her hands. She nestled quite comfortably in her arms and sniffed around her chest. “Cute cat. What’s her name?”

“Jelly,” Jamie said. “I’m her *human*.”

“Cool.”

Jelly’s purring was so loud that it could be heard from the other end of the room.

“I’m Dr. Bonnie Whitaker,” she smiled. “Opera Beta’s physicist.”

“Why were you punching that plastic thing?” Jamie asked, to the amusement of Tripp and Bonnie.

“Oh, just getting some exercise. Do you know Jitsaku?”

“No? What is it?”

“It’s a fusion of Jijitsu and Kung Fu. You use your enemy’s power against them.” She looked for a reaction from Tripp. “We have to stay fit and exercise otherwise we’ll slow down. Shame we can’t do the same for our mental state, isn’t it?”

Tripp grinned at Jamie. “Bonnie, why don’t you show young Jamie, here, your special feature?”

“Sure.”

She passed Jelly to Jamie and unbuckled her inner-suit pants. Emily widened her eyes, expecting the worst.

“Actually, it’s better if you don’t—”

“—No, it’s not what you think.”

Bonnie stepped out of her pants. Metal bolts and wires adorned her right leg. She lifted her thigh and showed off the unusual amalgam of joints and connectors.

“Oh wow,” Jamie said in awe, “What happened to you?”

“I don’t remember, exactly. When I was a girl I got an infection. It started in my foot and spread to my joints, here.” She pointed at her hip.

Her left leg was perfectly fine, and perfectly formed. Jamie’s attention was drawn to what lay between them behind her underwear.

“Hey, kid. Look at my leg, not my crotch.”

“Sorry.”

“I think you may have a new admirer, Bonnie,’ Tripp joked and

threw her a wink.

"Shut up.' Bonnie lifted her right knee and wiggled it around. The mechanics whirred away under her fingertip. "Jamie, you see that?"

"Yes?"

She removed the lower half of her false leg. "I can take it off and replace it with various things. It's made of titanium, a bit like the claws we'll be putting on Jelly, here."

"What?"

"Ah," Tripp said, trying to hush his colleague. "Yes, we haven't quite gotten around to discussing that just yet."

"I'm sorry," Emily butted in, full of confusion. "Did you say you're going to be putting Titanium on Jelly?"

"Oh," Bonnie reattached her leg and pulled up her pants. "Do they not know?"

"They do *now*," Tripp shook his head, angry at being put on the spot.

"What's this about?" Emily took Jelly from Jamie's arms and cradled her. "You're not going to interfere with her, are you?"

"It's a small procedure, but a necessary one," Tripp explained. "When we've reached our destination, Wool will perform what's known as a *cuticle restructure*."

"What's that?"

Bonnie buckled her belt and pressed a button on the wall. "Her claws will be removed and replaced with a set of titanium ones, along with a *thumb* attachment."

Jelly looked at the humans in the room, understanding very little of the surgical proposition.

"What?" Emily grew nervous. "No, I don't think so."

"It's a perfectly straightforward operation. Of course, it'll be reversed when she returns to Earth."

"No," Emily turned around and made for the door. "Come on, Jamie. We're leaving. I knew this was too good to be true."

"I'm afraid you've already agreed to it," Tripp said. "In the contract, the stipulation under enhanced modification."

Emily had heard enough. "No, I'm afraid not. We're going. Come on, Jamie."

"But, mom—"

"—No buts." Emily stormed out of the Fit Room, looking for the ship's exit. "This is *terriful*, no way to treat a cat. They should be locked up."

Jamie chased after his mother as she left the room, leaving Bonnie looking a little worse for wear.

"Sorry."

"*Great*," Tripp said, sarcastically. "Thanks for that, Bonnie. If it

weren't for your big mouth, they'd have never known."

"I'm sorry," Bonnie said. "I forgot."

Tripp ran after the Andersons with his voice lowered. "Yeah, that's your whole problem."

"Excuse me," Emily asked a technician in the hub corridor. "Where is the way out, please?"

He pointed at the far end of the walkway. "About a quarter of a mile down there, to section Z."

"Thanks."

She grabbed Jamie's hand and sprinted down the corridor with Tripp in pursuit.

"Emily, listen—"

"—No, leave us alone. The whole thing is off."

"No, you don't understand," Tripp pushed past the technician. "Please, stop. Let me set your mind at rest."

Emily halted in her tracks, intending to make a point in full view of the technicians. "No. Let me set *your* mind at rest, okay?"

Tripp slowed down and nodded. "Okay?"

"There is no way on Earth I am going to allow you to interfere with or *modify* my cat."

"It won't happen *on Earth*, in fact," Tripp said, hoping his clever joke might change her mind.

It didn't. It had the very opposite effect.

"Are you taking me seriously?"

"Of course," Tripp said. "It's a procedure we must put in place. Please allow me to explain."

"You've got thirty seconds."

A crowd of technicians couldn't help but listen in as they pretended to work.

"Jelly is the first cat on a manned mission to Saturn. She can't defend herself or perform basic procedural commands as she is. The infinity claws are a basic insurance policy for us and for her."

"What utter lessense—"

"—No, Emily, please. Stop talking and listen to me to me very carefully. We take Jelly's safety and well-being extremely seriously. I know it sounds strange. Bizarre, even. The whole removal of her claws sounds painful. I can assure you it isn't."

"You guys are sick."

Tripp sighed, nevertheless determined to make his point. "You saw what happened to Bisoubisou, yesterday? An allergic reaction?"

"Yes, it was terriful."

"Exactly. The primary reason why we couldn't take her on. Jelly responded well to the temporary set yesterday during the finals.

There's no danger. She'll be absolutely fine."

"Mom?" Jamie looked up at her. "She'll be okay."

Emily considered her position on the matter. The look in her little boy's eye was reassuring – to a point. There was simply no way Jamie would agree to the whole venture if he thought Jelly would come to any harm.

Then again, he was only five-years-old.

Emily looked Tripp dead in the eyes, wanting her arm twisted once and for all.

"No pain?" she reaffirmed.

"No. None whatsoever. I can have Wool walk you through the procedure—"

"—And she returns to normal once she's back, right?"

"That's right."

Emily huffed and took a final look at Jelly. In a strangely ironic twist she dug her claws into Emily's arm, offering her approval.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Welcome to the Control Deck," Tripp said. "This is where we operate Alpha Beta. All the communications are conducted from this area, here."

Tripp walked Jamie over to a huge bank of screens and buttons. An impressive sight for such young eyes. It resembled a video game console with ample opportunity for fun.

"Wow, can I sit in the seat?" Jamie ran over to the swivel chair parked in the middle of the unit.

"Sure. Please don't touch anything, though."

Tripp offered Emily a smile of contrition. He hoped that the debate they'd had in the corridor hadn't shown USARIC in too bad a light.

His attention was drawn to the flight deck. Dimitri Vasilov talked to two men Tripp didn't recognize.

"Jamie?"

"Yes, Tripp?"

"Over there, where those three men are. That's the flight deck."

"Wow."

Jamie stood up and jumped on the spot. "That's where you fly the spaceship?"

"Yes," Tripp whistled at the three men. "Hey, Dimitri."

The elderly man turned around, surprised to see that he and his colleagues had company. "Oh, yes. Of course. Hello, Tripp."

Dimitri walked with the two men over to the communications deck. "Tripp, your timing is impeccable. I'd like you to meet our new intake. Communication officer Tor Klyce and engineer Baldron Landaker."

"Ah, yes," Tripp shook their hands in turn. "I thought you were due to arrive tomorrow?"

"Good to meet you, finally." Tor Klyce, a thin man in his early thirties, spoke with a clear mid-western American accent. "Yes, we left Minneapolis Two a day early to run a few diagnostics on The Manuel."

"You know what USARIC is like. Always ahead of schedule," Baldron clocked Jamie and his mother – and the cat in the carry case. He seemed perturbed by their presence. "What's this? Are we allowing civilians aboard our vessels, now?"

"Oh, no. Not quite," Tripp explained. "Jamie and Emily are the owners of Jelly, here. The winner of the Star Cat Project."

"Okay," Baldron made eyes at the cat as it sniffed around the plastic bars. "One in a million, right?"

"Something like that," Tripp smiled. "She's a very special addition

to Opera Beta."

"It's ridiculous," Baldron cleared his throat and looked at Dimitri. "Sending a cat into space. I'm sorry, Jamie, but it's ridiculous. Please excuse me."

Baldron walked off, leaving Tripp, Jamie, Emily and Tor lost for words. "I'll be with Wool if you need me."

"I'm sorry about my colleague," Tor said, walking over to the communications deck. "He's a bit jet-lagged from the flight. He's very concerned about the logistics of the whole *cat* thing."

"How's Manuel doing? Retained all his faculties?"

"He's fine," Tor said, punching a few buttons on the panel. "Fifteen brontobytes of data need to be reconciled. He booted up about an hour and seems bright and perky, which is a good sign. You want to meet him?"

"What is a… *man-well*?" Jamie asked.

"The autopilot. A veritable data bank of knowledge," Tor explained, pointing at the screen in front of him. "To activate him, all you need to do is click your fingers and say his name."

"Okay."

"Did you ever see Fawlty Towers?" Tripp smirked. "That old TV show from the twentieth century?"

"What is a TV show?" Jamie asked. "Is it like a screen?"

"Never mind," Tor chuckled. "Just click your fingers and say his name."

Jamie held up his hand and snapped his fingers. "Manuel?"

Snap.

A holograph of a book appeared in the middle of the room, floating on the spot, flapping its pages from end to end. "Good pre-afternoon. How may I assist you?"

Jamie blinked at the transparent object floating in the air. "What do I—"

"—Ask it anything you like. It has all the answers."

Jamie looked around, taking the sheer wonder of the deck into his mind. He drew a blank for the first time in his inquisitive, young life.

"Uh, why are you called Manuel?"

Manuel sped over to Jamie and opened up its pages, displaying a black and white image of Pascal D'Souza.

"My full name is The Manuel. I was put together by my creator, the late Pascal D'Souza. Originally, I was referred to as The Manual, however, when they loaded me into USARIC's mainframe the first time, an error was made. As you can see."

The picture of Pascal D'Souza moved like a recorded video. Angry

with his fellow scientist, he bopped him on the back.

"Why isn't The Manual responding to my commands?"

His colleague pressed a button on his computer and pointed to the erroneous letter in the manual's name. "There's been a slip up. Someone must have pressed *E* when they meant to press *A*."

Pascal shook his head in incredulity. "So we've christened our hyper-intelligent autopilot and data bank as… *The Manuel*? What is this, some kind of joke?"

"I'm sorry, Dr D'Souza—"

The image paused, allowing Manuel the flip over by one page.

Manuel's holograph turned to Jamie. "I am able to process close to one billion commands at any given time."

"Wow, that's a lot."

Tor chuckled to himself. "We were just completing Manuel's assessment. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, please," Jamie said.

"Manuel?" Tor asked. "What does USARIC stand for?"

"It won't stand for anything," Manuel said. "They are a very stern company."

Emily and Tripp smirked at the crude joke.

"That's not that I meant and you know it," Tor said. "Please, give me the correct answer."

"It was just a joke."

"I know, give me the correct answer."

"USARIC stands for the United States and Russian Intergalactic Confederation."

"Correct," Tor pressed a button on the communications panel. Manuel's holograph lit up. "Tell me the genesis of the company, please?"

"Certainly. USARIC was formed in the year 2100, shortly after the disbanding of NASA."

"Correct." Tor winked at Jamie. "Good, isn't he?

"Yes. I want one when we get back home."

"Ha," Tor punched in some data on the comms panel. "Manuel?"

"Yes, Tor?"

"Can you explain to our guest why USARIC was formed?"

"Certainly," Manuel said, flapping opening and spinning to the end of his book. Footage of a space shuttle launching from its pad played out.

A Brief History Of USARIC

Pg 808,107

(exposition dump #157/b)

The United States and Russian Intergalactic Confederation (USARIC) *is the result of a convergence of two states – the US state of Alaska, and the north-eastern territory of Chukotka in Russia. The Bering Strait lies in the middle, separating the two nations, which lent its name to the treaty drawn between the two nations.*

The two states amalgamated to form Chukaska, across the start and end point of the international time zone.

In order to allay a second cold war, the presidents of both countries agreed that the two states merge jurisdictions, thereby forming an alliance.

The switch took place in 2087, two years after the Bering Treaty was formed. In 2088, it was decided that the two nations conform to a confederacy.

The result was the free movement of people from both the US and Russia into both jurisdictions.

In five years, both economies saw a surge in productivity. As a result, wages kept in line with inflation. Companies set up shop globally, at various points in both countries to quell the cost of distribution.

The most remarkable effect was the formation of USARIC. NASA was summarily disbanded. Its protocols and legislature was reconfigured to merge both the US and Russia's efforts to explore outer space as one entity. In effect, any discoveries that were made would be shared equally. A combined space race, with certain caveats, if you will.

Two months after this formation, tragedy struck. Cape Canaveral in Florida disappeared, along with the rest of the state due to The Great Southern Flood of 2092. Four million people lost their lives and the nation lost its sunshine state. It proved to be an avoidable event. For the previous one hundred years, scientists had speculated that global warming would have this effect. The government chose not to listen.

Floridians fled to Texas, contributing to the density of that state's populace.

On the recommendation of the governor at the time, the United States opted to split the state into North and South.

Despite the loss of Florida, The United States gained three states in the amalgamation of Chukaska and the division of Texas. Of course, the flag was redesigned to represent the fifty-two states and its convergence with Russia, hence the addition of the hammer (but not the familiar sickle, as it was deemed to be an outmoded tool.)

USARIC relocated their base to Cape Claudius in the state of South Texas.

Located on the southwest peninsula, it is the closest point to the equator that can launch vessels into space. One of the protocols in the Infinity Clause stipulates that no Russians may take part in any manned exploration. It was a stipend that caused no end of frustration to that particular nation—

"—Okay, that's enough, Manuel," Tor clicked his fingers. "We don't want to bore the poor boy, do we?"

Jamie blinked rapidly, his little mind going into overdrive. "Wow."

"Funny you should mention that, Tor," Manuel flipped his pages and landed toward the middle of the book. "In conjunction with Pure Genius, I have been conducting research on evolution since my reboot. My findings have been quite curious. Would you like to see them?"

"Uh, okay?" Jamie pretended to understand. He knew it sounded scientific and serious, and that was enough for him.

"With your permission, I'd like to explain to you a concept I have named *The Natural Order of Life*."

"Go ahead, Manuel," Tor said. "But make it quick, we can't stand around chatting all day."

"Certainly," Manuel rose into the air and beamed an image onto the floor. "Observe. The Natural Order of Things has long-since been a quandary for humankind. Life, hence, any living and breathing organism."

A recorded holograph of a cat pouncing on a rat played out across the floor. Jamie waved his hand right through it in amazement.

"Thus, we can reasonably ascertain the following. Every predator has a prey, as exemplified in my findings.

For every name that appeared, a corresponding image floated next to it.

"Where the greater-than symbol is present denotes *is afraid of*. Broadly-speaking, the chain is as follows…"

Insect > Mouse
Mouse > Cat
Cat > Dog
Dog > Man
Man > Woman

Tripp and Tor took in the information with great expediency.

Jamie sat there, stunned. "What does that mean?"

"The Natural Order of Life," Manuel explained. "However, the discovery was the reconciliation of the loop. Thus..."

Woman > Insect

"That's quite the discovery, Manuel," Tor rolled his eyes at Tripp. He lowered his voice enough for Manuel not to hear him. "He may need a bit more calibrating before we actually take off, by the way."

"Yes, it's good to see he hasn't lost his sense of humor," Tor chuckled and rubbed his hands, eager to leave. He looked at Jelly and raised his eyebrows. "I'll be back soon. We just have a small matter of the acquisition of our new colleague to deal with…"

USARIC Headquarters

Conference Chamber

Dimitri Vasilov and Maar Sheck sat at the far end of the conference table chatting to themselves.

Jamie stroked Jelly as she lay on the other end of the table. She was sedentary for the time being, enjoying the final few moments she had with her owner.

Tripp sat with Emily, going through the final particulars of the contract. He flipped over to the final summary sheet.

"Just need your signature in triplet. Here, here, and here," Tripp pointed at the three sets of dotted lines.

"Okay," Emily hesitated for a second and looked at her son as he tickled Jelly's stomach.

"Meow."

"Are you quite sure she's going to be all right?" Emily asked Tripp. She wondered why the two stern-looking men were at the other end of the table and disassociating themselves so blatantly.

"Yes, of course," Tripp said, watching her sign the documents. "I will make sure of that, personally. You have my word."

"I hope so."

"You know, Emily," Tripp tried to reassure her. "I have a son your boy's age. I know how much Jelly means to him."

Emily scribbled her signature as quick as she could and pushed the paper away from her chest.

"A very antiquated way of conducting business. Pen and paper?" She passed the pen back to him and watched the ink dry on the paper.

"It's the way we like to do things. *Some* of us at USARIC haven't quite shaken off the analog stuff just yet."

Maar broke away from his conversation with Dimitri. "All good?"

"Yes, I think so," Tripp lifted the papers in his hand and showed

them to his superiors.

"Good," Dimitri said. "So, I think we're all done here."

"It seems so," Tripp added.

"Are there any final questions or queries you have for us?" Maar asked.

"You can't tell me what the mission is? Where, exactly, she's going?"

"I'm afraid not," Maar said. "If anything goes wrong it would be bad news."

"What if something does go wrong?"

"It won't."

"Right," Emily said, not terribly convinced.

"But if it does, it's better that you don't know the details. Trust us, everything will be fine."

Jamie stroked Jelly's face. She loved every second of it. He looked up and tried his luck. "When does Opera Beta leave?"

"Two weeks from now, young man," Maar said. "She's due to return in at the end of 2120. How old will you be then?"

"Seven."

The door to the conference room opened and Wool walked in with a silver plastic cage under her arm. "Hello, everyone. Hi, Jamie."

"Hi, Wool."

She offered the boy a smile and sat the cage onto the conference desk. "Is she ready?"

Jelly rolled over and stretched her hind legs out. Her tail flapped around. Jamie took a moment to watch her in action. A small, quiet movement he decided to commit to memory before she jumped to her feet and demanded one, last hug.

"Meow."

Jamie held out his hand, fingers tucked together. Jelly ran her face along his hand, making a fuss of the connection. He held her head in both hands and looked her in the eyes. She had no clue what was about to happen.

"We'll see each other again, girl," Jamie whispered. The reality set in the moment the words escaped his lips. He began to tear up. Jelly wanted to know why he was so sad.

"Take her," he said through his tears.

Jelly tilted her face, wondering why her friend was so upset. The drama set Emily off, too. "Oh God, please. Just do it."

"Yes, of course," Wool clapped her hands together and showed Jelly to the cage. "In you go, pet."

"Meow," Jelly looked at it and decided not to go. She approached the end of the table and tried to get Jamie's attention.

“No, no,” Wool cupped Jelly’s face in her hand with deft expertise. She slid the cage up to her behind and pushed her back.

The cage door slammed shut, imprisoning Jelly. She clawed at the cage, trying to push it open.

Wool lifted the cage and made her way to the conference exit.

Jamie took a final glance at his cat being escorted out of his life. She had a look of disappointment on her face. How could my best friend do this to me? The look seemed to say it. It was hard for Jamie to shake off.

Then, he slammed the conference desk and stood up, barely able to peer over it. Tripp, Maar, Dimitri and his mother turned to him in shock.

“Take me with you,” Jamie pleaded.

“What?” Tripp asked.

“Take me with you. I know how space works and I can help you on your mission.”

“But, Jamie, it doesn’t work like that.”

“Poppet, no,” Emily held her son back. The same couldn’t be said for his floods of tears. “Jamie, listen—”

“—Mr Healy, you’re an astronaut. I’m going to be an astronaut one day, too. Let me go with you.”

“Jamie,” Tripp tried, calmly, “It takes years of training. And we can’t allow children on—”

“—But you’re taking a cat,’ Jamie interrupted and pointed at the cage. “You can take a cat but you can’t take me?”

“Poppet, please.”

Tripp held out his hands. He felt useless. “I, uh, don’t know what to say?”

“Then say *yes*.” Jamie released himself from his mother’s clutches and clambering toward the cage in Wool’s hand. “I want to go with her.”

Emily caught his jacket and pulled him back. “No. It’s done.”

Tripp felt sorry for the poor little boy. “I’m sorry, Jamie.’

“We should get going,” Wool turned to do the door, trying to avoid the unfolding grief in the room. “Goodbye, Jamie.”

“But, mom,” Jamie struggled to free himself, choking with regret through his vocal chords. “I d-don’t want her to g-go—”

“—Jamie, no. It’s done,” Emily whispered.

The door shut on Jelly’s face.

His cat was gone forever, as far as Jamie was concerned.

Little consolation for the boy who broke down on the table in a heap of turmoil, crying his eyes out.

A day he’d never forget.

A decision he’d never forgive himself for making.

He'd allowed his friend go off into the great unknown. If only he could take it all back.

The USARIC logo spun around above his head, triumphantly. The company had won.

A five-year-old's loss wasn't enough to stop the company's endeavor…

CHAPTER EIGHT

USARIC Data Point

Space Opera Beta

Year: 2119
Days traveled: 551
Distance to Enceladus: 203, 140 miles

The hyper sleep arena contained nine chambers, the first and sixth of which had been opened.

Tripp Healy lay asleep in the second pod. He'd grown an impressive amount of facial hair during the journey.

Captain Daryl Katz surveyed the chamber, enjoying what was about to be the last moment of pure solitude.

"Manuel?" Katz asked.

"Yes, Daryl?"

"We'll start with chamber two and Tripp Healy. Once he's oriented we'll move on to the others. Can you prepare the debrief in the meantime, please."

"Certainly, Daryl," Manuel said, "Do you wish to notify Tripp about what we've found?"

"Not yet. I'll update him myself when he's oriented."

"Understood. Releasing chamber two, now."

Katz approached Tripp's chamber and pressed his palm to the wall. "Okay, Tripp..."

The Perspex on the second chamber unbolted and lifted down. Tripp remained asleep for a few moments. His eyelids fluttered against the vibrations of his unit.

"Tripp?" Katz asked, softly. "Wakey-wakey."

He opened his eyes very slowly, adjusting his retinas to the light shining down on him.

He reached up and wiped his mouth.

"Ugh," Tripp inspected the thin layer of black film that had wiped off on his finger. "Are we here?"

"Yes," Katz said, making his way to the computer console. "Be careful with your first few steps. I'll fix you a drink."

"Thanks."

Tripp stepped out of the chamber and temporarily lost his balance. He looked down the length of his body, analyzing his underwear and paper footwear.

"My legs feel like concrete logs."

“You’re acting like you’ve never been in space before.”

“I know, I know,” Tripp pushed himself away from the wall and ground his right heel into the ground. “I’ve been asleep for a year. Somehow, it doesn’t feel that long.”

Tripp looked at the remaining chambers that housed the rest of the crew. He clocked the opened sixth chamber. “Haloo is awake, as well?”

“Yes. You, me, her and Manuel,” Katz said, offering Tripp a cup of coffee and a small, white pill. “Get some caffeine in you, and take this.”

“Thanks,” Tripp tossed the pill in his mouth and knocked it back with a swig of coffee.

Katz eyed him, trying to see if his colleague managed to retain his faculties after a year of deep sleep.

“All good?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Tripp rolled his shoulders and tilted his neck. “So, what’s the news? When did you wake up?”

“This time yesterday,” Katz moved to the console and hit a button. A spectral image of Space Opera Alpha hovered over the desk, turning around on its axis. “Look at this.”

“Opera Alpha?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you showing me Alpha?”

Katz looked at Tripp and performed a last-minute check to see if anyone was eavesdropping. “Manuel discovered it en route to Enceladus about two months ago. It never disappeared.”

“What? Where is it now?”

“It’s orbiting the dark side of Enceladus, about two hundred thousand miles away.

“That’s ridiculous,” Tripp shook his head, thinking he was still dreaming. “That moon doesn’t have enough pull for orbit.”

“It’s not gravitational, Tripp,” Katz pointed at the thrusters on the back of the holoprint. “The vessel is active, still running. Traveling alongside it. Our star drones never picked it up. It’s been sheltered in darkness.”

“Have we tried making contact with Opera Alpha?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Nothing. It’s not responding,” Katz enlarged the image and kept his voice quiet. “It’s been missing for four years, all communication lost. Until now.”

“Do the others know?”

“Of course they don’t, they’re all asleep.”

“No, I don’t mean *them*,” Tripp waved his hand at the hyper sleep

chambers. “I mean back home. Does USARIC know?”

“Not yet. I’ve waited to inform you before proceeding. I’ve talked it over with Manuel.”

“What did he suggest?”

“That we wake everyone up and inform them, then report to USARIC with a unanimous decision to divert our course.”

Tripp found the revelation compelling. “What are we going to tell them?”

“The truth, of course.”

Botanix

Tripp walked along the concourse, tugging on his inner-skin suit, ironing out the creases. He reached the single door and pressed his palm against the panel on the wall.

“Level Three. Botanix,” a female voice announced. “Please ensure all incendiaries are secure.”

“The door beeped and slid open, allowing Tripp into the area.

Six rows of plants covered in silver foil lined the room. Tripp glanced at the newly-installed fresh water filter in the middle of the room.

“Haloo? Are you here?”

“Tripp?” Haloo poked her head out from around the fountain and lifted the watering hose. “You’re awake?”

“Yes, came out about an hour ago.”

Tripp walked along the plant life and took the opportunity to get a lungful of the freshest air aboard the vessel. “Remind me to spend more time in here when I’m resting.”

Haloo returned to watering a row of flowers by her feet. “Have you come to chill out, or do you need something?”

“Just saying hello before everyone else wakes up.”

Haloo didn’t seem impressed. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re here to ask a favor?”

Tripp watched Haloo hose down the soil, wondering how on Earth – or space – she knew his real intentions.

“What makes you say that?”

“Your posture,” she said. “The way you entered the room.”

“That’s creepy.”

“Also, you gave me an answer to a question I never asked.”

“You asked if I was awake?”

Haloo spun the dial on the hose, shutting off the water. She arched her back and smiled at him. “I didn’t ask. I made an

observation."

Tripp chuckled. "Are you always like this?"

"You want me to soak you?" Haloo lifted the nozzle in Tripp's direction.

"No."

"Explain this for me," Haloo said, retrieving a black capsule from her inner thigh pocket. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Yes. Standard issue for all galactic exploration."

"I don't like it. We're not in the KGB. We can't be expected to commit suicide if it all goes wrong.

"You may find you'd reassess that decision if you found yourself in serious trouble. It's just an insurance policy. Everyone has one."

A spurious silence fell between the two. She slipped the black capsule back into her pocket with displeasure. "Anything else?"

"Opera Alpha has been found."

"Katz has told you, then?" Haloo and Tripp stared at each other for two seconds longer than comfort allowed. She finally looked away and rolled up the hose. "Of course I knew. What do you think Katz and I have been doing while you guys have been asleep?"

"Do we know if Botanix on Alpha is operational?"

"We don't know anything, yet."

"Because if it is, there's a good chance Zillah and her crew might still be alive."

Haloo stopped and turned around, upset. "Don't you think we already thought of that?"

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Haloo made her way to the door. "We need to investigate Alpha. Make sure that they're actually *dead*…"

The Crew Hub

Six Hours Later…

The hub served as the crew meeting point in the nucleus of Space Opera Beta – the fixed point of gravity within the ship.

The screen on the wall provided a beautiful view of space and Saturn revolving some hundreds of thousands of miles in the distance.

It had taken the best part of the day to ensure everyone disembarked their hyper-sleep chambers successfully.

Captain Katz stood by the window and caught everyone's attention. "Beta team, I think we're ready. We're just waiting for Wool."

Haloo and Tripp sat next to each other at the conference table.

Opposite them, Tor Klyce and Baldron Landaker downed their fifth cup of coffee.

Jaycee, decked out in his armor exo-suit, sat with Bonnie at the foot of the table.

The door to the hub slid opened.

Wool ar-Ban walked in and rubbed her hands together. “Sorry I’m late, Daryl.”

“Wool, during debrief I am *Captain*, if you please.”

“I’m sorry,” Wool took her seat next in between Jaycee and Bonnie.

“It’s nothing personal. It’s more for the minute-taking and data point notes.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Okay,” Katz snapped his fingers, beckoning Manuel over. “Manuel?”

“Yes, Captain,” the holographic book flew over and flipped through its pages. A blank sheet appeared, followed by a hovering transparent pen. “Ready when you are.”

“Don’t minute this part, Manuel.” Katz approached the conference table and pressed his finger on the glass surface. A diagram of Space Opera Alpha appeared in front of the crew.

Manuel’s pen clicked off. The pages flipped shut, forcing the book over to the captain.

“Until twenty-four hours ago, we thought Saturn Cry was transmitting from Enceladus. It wasn’t.”

“No?” Tor took a keen interest in the revelation. “So where is it coming from?”

“Here.” Katz pointed at the radio transmitter on the bridge of Space Opera Alpha. “It seems like Enceladus is using Opera Alpha as a beacon to send the message.”

“Alpha is present?” Bonnie asked.

“Yes, Dr Whitaker. She’s orbiting the dark side of Enceladus.”

“Do we know if the crew are alive?” Baldron asked.

“We don’t know anything, yet. We’ve tried to communicate with Alpha’s Manuel, but to no avail.”

“What are you suggesting, Captain?” Tripp asked, knowing the answer already.

“I am recommending a change of course. We dock with them, establish contact and rescue any souls on board.”

“What if no-one survived?” Haloo asked.

“Then there’s nobody to rescue. We continue our trajectory to Enceladus and conduct our inquiries.”

Tripp stood up and pointed at the holograph of the ship. “It makes sense to investigate. Enceladus itself can’t possibly be sending

the signal. It's just gas and ice. It's using Opera Alpha's comms to transmit the signal, that much we do know."

"Hold on a second," Bonnie stood up, giving as good as the crew were getting. "Alpha goes off-radar for five years. Missing."

"Yes."

"And now it's suddenly reappeared?"

"Well, I'm not sure if—"

"—And you want us to go and check it out?"

Tripp interrupted the feisty woman. "Let's review our situation, Dr. Whitaker. Our mission to Enceladus is to investigate the source of Saturn Cry."

"Right."

"And we *know* it's using Alpha to transmit that signal. I mean, that's just plain fact, now."

"How do we know?"

Tripp pressed his finger to the glass. "Manuel?"

The book floated over to the screen and opened up. "Yes, Commander?"

"Configure point A on Opera Alpha radar and broadcast, please."

"Configuring now."

Manuel beeped three times and tuned himself into the holograph on the screen. The radio transmitter flashed red, and threw its connection to the speaker on the book.

A hissing noise fired up, followed by three strings of an electric guitar.

"Ugh, we're fed up with hearing this thing, already," Tor shook his head and nudged Baldron in the ribs. "We'd rather go back to sleep."

"Don't be funny, Tor," Tripp said, encouraging the crew to listen to the message play out.

Whump-whump-whump… hiss…

"Sounds different?"

"Twelve seconds in," Tripp held up his hand to halt the chatter. "Shh."

A warbled thud followed by a high-pitch squeal, like that of an injured lion, streaked across the audio.

"You hear that?"

"Yes," Jaycee said, "Sounds different to the one we're used to hearing."

"We're closer to the signal, so the quality is better. Pause playback, Manuel."

"Yes, commander."

The hissing stopped. Everyone's attention turned to the diagram of Space Opera Alpha.

Katz walked up to Tripp and addressed the crew. “As far as Commander Healy and I can see, we have two options. One, we establish a Task and Finish protocol to rescue whatever we can of Alpha.”

“What’s the second option?” Bonnie asked.

“We ignore Alpha entirely and continue our course to Enceladus proper.”

“In other words, we do what we’re supposed to?”

Katz sighed. “I need to report back to USARIC and notify them of our unanimous decision to investigate Alpha. For that, we need consent from every soul aboard this ship, as per The Infinity Clause.”

Tripp looked at each crew member. Most seemed to be on board with the rescue attempt – all except Bonnie.

“Can we, in good conscience, ignore Alpha? Can we continue our mission to Enceladus *knowing* that we ignored our colleagues and left them for dead?”

Katz interjected. “Dr. Whitaker, can I ask you what the problem is?”

Everyone turned to her for a response.

“Sure,” she said. “We don’t know what state the ship is in. We don’t know what happened to Alpha. What if they’re all dead? Or something has happened to them? We could suffer the same fate.”

“The fate of being hidden on the dark side of Saturn’s sixth moon?” Tor suggested, somewhat sarcastically, “That we were okay all along and went missing, only for our friends to come poking around and ignore our cry for help?”

“That’s the point, Tor,’ Bonnie interjected, ‘Alpha isn’t crying for help. They’re just *there*. You seem very keen for us to board and investigate,” Bonnie said, turning to the holograph of Space Opera Alpha. “Opera Alpha isn’t reaching out to us. If they were alive they’d be yelling at us to rescue them.”

Tor ducked his head and folded his arms. He didn’t have a response.

“What if they’re unable to reach out for help, Dr. Whitaker?” Katz attempted to balance the odds. “If, somehow, they’re unable to communicate for whatever reason?”

“Then that’s a bunch of six souls on board a spaceship I don’t want to go anywhere near.”

“So you’re saying *no*, Dr. Whitaker?” Katz asked, disappointed. “We discover that Alpha is there and *don’t* investigate?”

“I’m not saying *no*,” Bonnie said, looking around the table. “Come on, am I the only one here who’s concerned about this change of course?”

Tor and Baldron looked away.

Jaycee couldn't look Bonnie in the eye.

Haloo, Tripp and Katz, on the other hand, had no compunction in demonstrating their desire to rescue the ship.

"What's the first rule?" Bonnie asked. "Be skeptical. Question *everything*. My question is this. Why did Alpha go missing? Why is it back? Why is it being used by a *moon* to transmit a message."

"We don't know, Dr. Whitaker," Tripp said, "Are you saying you don't want to find out?"

She shot him a look of disdain, knowing full well that her superior was correct.

"Ugh."

"Okay, all those in favor of diverting course to check out Alpha raise your hand. Ayes?"

Everyone's hand rose into the air. Everyone, that is, except Bonnie's.

Tripp gave her a smile, keeping his hand up. "Dr. Whitaker?"

"Fine." She sighed and caved in, raising her hand. "But I want it on record that I'm not happy with this."

"The ayes have it," Katz said, making his way out of the hub. "We are less than twenty hours from Opera Alpha. I suggest you all orient yourself as you see fit and prepare for contact."

Katz reached the door and turned around to Wool ar-Ban. "Can you wake up our feline guest, please?"

"Yes, Captain," Wool joined Katz and walked out of the hub.

Tor turned to the others and shook his head. "I keep forgetting that stupid cat is on board."

"Don't call her stupid," Tripp said. "She might just be the key to what we're looking for."

"Yeah, right," Tor said, kicking his chair away from the console in defiance. "She's more trouble than she's worth. Landaker, can I have a word, please?"

"Yes."

The pair walked out of the hub talking to themselves, leaving Bonnie, Tripp, Haloo and Jaycee to chat amongst themselves.

* * *

Wool leaned over Jelly's hyper-sleep containment unit and hovered her finger over the release switch. A smile crept across her face as she took a moment to absorb the beauty of the creature.

"Look at you," she whispered, "You look so peaceful. So perfect."

Jelly looked as comfortable as could be, resting face-up toward the glass.

“There’s a lot to play with up here. I think you’re going to like it.”

Wool hit the button.

The glass retracted along the length of Jelly’s body. A few strands of fur lifted into the air as she shuffled around, still unconscious.

Wool put on a pair of plastic gloves and reached into the containment unit. She stroked Jelly’s stomach with her knuckle. The monitor attached to the unit began to beep, indicating that Jelly was about to wake up.

“Jelly?”

The cat opened her eyes and lifted her paws to her face. She wiped her brow and spun onto her side.

“There we go,” Wool reached in and lifted Jelly under her arms.

“Meow,” Jelly grunted, exercising her vocal chords for the first time in over a year.

“Good girl,” Wool whispered, cradling Jelly in her arms. “Take your time, sweetie.”

Jelly shuffled around and kicked her hind legs forward, stretching every muscle in her body. She licked her lips and dug her paws into Wool’s inner-skin suit.

“Hey, gorgeous. How are you?”

Jelly licked her lips again and clung to Wool’s arm. She let out a whine, fascinated by her surroundings.

An infinite playground.

Desks, monitors, and chairs – ample opportunity to mess around, discover things and hide.

“Meow.”

“Yes, Jelly,” Wool walked over to the lab’s bench in the middle of the room. “This is your new home.”

She set Jelly onto the bench. The cat jumped from her arms and immediately made for the edge of the bench. A five-foot drop to the floor didn’t seem like much of a task.

“Oh no, no, no,” Wool grabbed Jelly and slid her back along the bench. “Not yet you don’t, sweetie. I need to inspect you.”

“Meow.” Jelly struggled to release herself from Wool’s clutches.

“Hold on, girl.”

“Look at me, Anderson,” Wool took out a mini flashlight and shone it in Jelly’s face. “Left eye, please.”

Jelly’s orange pupil focused on Wool’s face.

“Seems good. Right eye, please.”

The light zipped over to Jelly’s other eye. Wool look around for signs of anything that may be untoward.

“Nope. Looking good.”

“Meow.”

“All set. A bit dilated, but nothing to worry about.,” Wool ran her

hand along Jelly's back smoothing out her fur. "Hungry?"

Jelly ran the side of her head along Wool's hand and purred.

"Very good, Jelly. Very good."

Wool ran her thumb over Jelly's right shoulder and observed the scar where the chip had been implanted. "Manuel?"

"Yes, Wool?"

"Can we synchronize our guest with your coordinates, please?"

"Of course."

The holographic book appeared from out of thin air and flashed a green locater against a map of the ship. "J. Anderson is currently in the hyper-sleep quarters."

"Yes, I know she is. She's right here."

"Meow." Jelly launched into the air and tried to claw at the holographic book. It flew backwards, trying to evade capture.

The book fluttered to the other side of the bench. Jelly turned around and made for it once again.

"Ha. Jelly, it's no use, sweetie. You can't touch Manuel."

"Meow."

Jelly swiped at Manuel, but missed it entirely as he hovered several feet into the air.

"I know she can't touch me," Manuel said, "But she scares me."

"She's just a cat, Manuel."

"I realize that. I think I'll just stay up here for a moment."

Wool chuckled and lifted Jelly under her arms. "Come here, pet."

"Meow."

Jelly threw her arms over Wool's shoulder and kept looking around as they made their way out of the hyper-sleep quarters.

Wool carried Jelly through the hyper-sleep concourse – a long corridor with boxes and attached units on either side of the wall.

"Now, if I let you down do you promise not to run off?"

"Meow."

"I'll take that as a yes."

Wool squatted and released Jelly onto the ground. "Enjoy yourself while you can, Jelly."

The cat wasted no time exploring the concourse. She bolted to the far end as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Whoa, calm down, pet," Wool yelled.

Jelly reached the far door and found that it wouldn't open. She whined and knocked it with her head.

Then, the door slid open, startling her. "Meow."

She looked up the legs of the man standing in front of her. Tripp looked down and smiled.

"Ah, she's awake."

“Yes, Tripp,” Wool said, hopping after Jelly. “Just stretching her legs.”

“I can see that,” Tripp looked at the mischievous cat. “Wearing yourself out, are you?”

“Meow.”

“Such a good girl,” Tripp crouched down and offered her his hand. She ran her face along his fingers. “How long till we suit her up?”

Wool scooped Jelly into her hands and looked at her face. “We’ll get her fed and let her get her energy up. Shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours to suit her up.”

“Very good,” Tripp began to walk away.

“Tripp?” Wool hollered after him.

“Yes?”

“We’re going to be okay, aren’t we?”

“Of course we are.”

“What with the change of course and everything?”

“Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t we be?”

Wool placed her face on top of Jelly’s head and breathed in. “If something happened to Jelly, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Wool, look,” Tripp walked back and offered her some reassurance. “We’ll be fine. Androgyne will check Opera Alpha out first and let us know what’s happening. There’s absolutely nothing to be afraid of.”

“I know,” Wool muttered. “That’s what’s scaring me.”

“What, you’re scared because there’s nothing to be scared about?”

“Yes,” Wool half-chuckled at her own revelation. “Something doesn’t seem right.”

“Exactly,” Tripp smile. “That’s what we’re here to fix.”

CHAPTER NINE

Daryl entered the control deck at the front of the ship and made his way to the pilot's seat.

Tor Klyce busily tapped away on the board on his communication panel.

"Tor, any response from Opera Alpha?"

"I'm patching into their network now, Captain."

"We're off record, Tor, you can call me Daryl for the time being," Katz said as he strapped himself into his chair. He flipped two red switches which created a polymorphic grid on the screen overlooking Saturn. "Hit the radio on frequency zero-five-four-niner."

"Understood."

Tor unhooked the comms device and squeezed it in his hand. "This is USARIC vessel Space Opera Beta, communicating on a frequency of zero-five-four-niner. Do we have contact?"

Nothing but a short burst of static came from the speaker. Tor held the button down again.

"I repeat, USARIC vessel Space Opera Beta, communicating on—"

A short burst of warbled static shot through the speaker, cutting Tor's announcement.

"What was that?"

Katz turned around in haste. "Try again."

"Space Opera Alpha, do you read us?"

The warbled sound dampened down into a familiar hiss.

"I'm not sure what that interruption was."

"—Everything okay, here?" Baldron Landaker walked into the control deck, adjusting his inner-suit sleeves. "Do we have contact with Opera Alpha?"

"Not as such, no," Tor said, turning a dial on his control bank. "Just a weird static. Erratic at best, and we can't do anything about it."

Baldron punched his mechanical fists together and looked over at Katz. "We still on with them?"

"Yes we are, Baldron," Katz returned to his controls. "Just making up our revised route to the docking bay, now. Is Androgyne prepped?"

"Jaycee and Tripp are with her now," Baldron said, slowing down his speech. The enormity of Saturn and her rings overwhelmed him for the first time since waking up. "My God, would you look at that. She's a beast, right?"

"Yes she is," Katz said, busily punching in data into his computer. "Alas, she's not where we're headed. See that tiny white dot, top-left?"

"Yes," Baldron walked over to the flight deck. He stood next to

Katz and took in the view.

"That, there, is Opera Alpha," Katz said. "We're just a few hours away…"

N-Vigorate Chamber

Level Three

Tripp and Bonnie entered the smallest compartment aboard the spaceship.

A circular hub with a diameter of exactly fifty feet.

Tripp made a beeline for a silver-coated "woman' resting on an electric chair at the opposite end of the room.

"You think she's up for the job?" Bonnie asked, following behind Tripp.

"With a one hundred percent success rate?" Tripp asked, "I'm surprised we haven't been replaced altogether by the Androgyne series."

"Yeah," Bonnie shot the sleeping droid a stern look. "Look at her. A useless piece of junk."

"Until we boot her up, that is," Tripp felt the side of Androgyne's neck. The droid was extremely lifelike. He pushed her earlobe out with his knuckle, revealing a small tattoo on her neck, which read *Manning/Synapse*.

Tripp nodded over to the gears on the desk beside Androgyne's chair. "Bonnie, hit the juice."

"My pleasure."

She walked over to the lever and yanked it back.

The droid's chair lit up and vibrated.

"Activating Androgyne," announced a female voice.

Tripp took a step back, allowing the droid some space. "Moment of truth."

Bonnie smirked and scratched the side of her leg. "She's such a show-off."

Androgyne's eyelids lifted, revealing her crystal blue eyes. She blinked a couple of times, emotionless and peaceful. A faint sound of the mechanics operating her joints could be heard.

Finally, she performed a smile. To say it was anything other than lifelike would be a gross understatement.

"Oh, my. I am awake," Androgyne said, lifting her head forward slightly. "Good after-morning, Tripp Healy. Dr Whitaker."

"It's actually evening by our watches," Tripp smiled at her. "But we forgive you. It is dark outside after all."

“Is it not always dark in space, commander?” Androgyne blinked twice and tilted her head left and right.

“How are you, Androgyne?” Bonnie asked.

She turned her head to Bonnie and went to stand out of her chair. “I need to calibrate, could you please—”

A thick cable attached to the back of her head yanked back, throwing her bottom to the seat once again.

“Whoa. Easy, tiger,” Tripp moved forward and held Androgyne by the sides of her face. “You’re still plugged in. Don’t move.”

“Plugged in?”

“Yes, uh, give me a second…”

Tripp reached around the back of her head and lifted her hair up. The cable came free as he twisted it away from the top of her neck. “There, you’re free now.”

“What was the problem?” Androgyne asked. “Was there something on my head?”

“Uh, no,” Tripp shot Bonnie a threatening stare. She tried not to laugh.

The Manuel

Pg 11,256

The Androgyne series two first came to fruition in the year 2075. It was designed to replace canaries on space missions, to use the laymen vernacular.

Official estimates are unclear but, since records began in the early twentieth century, an estimated three hundred birds had been used on missions and almost all of them died on their expeditions.

They were used to test the atmosphere and oxygen levels of planets, in much the same way miners did when scavenging the depths of the Earth.

Due to the extreme upheaval caused by PAAC, People Against Animal Cruelty, the decision to abandon guinea pigs with wings (the nomenclature associated with canaries in such conditions) was enacted. They were replaced androids with a human brain and lungs.

The Androgyne series is commonly referred to as a simple machine. *It operates much like a human: it requires oxygen to breathe. It desires attention and a sense of belonging and purpose.*

Unlike a human being, however, the Androgyne does not know that it is not human. It is therefore essential that any and all crew members oblige the android accordingly.

On the 21st October, 2102, USARIC, together with the Androgyne series company, Manning/Synapse*, conducted an experiment.*

Under controlled conditions, they hooked up an early series droid to an MRI scan and attached its wrists and ankles shut to a rejuvenation console. In other words, it had its power cable attached to the back of its neck.

The lab technician entered the room and proceeded to tell the droid that it had been remanded in custody. That "she' was under suspicion of attacking a crew member.

It was absolute lessense.

The series 1.0 Androgyne had committed no such crime. Naturally, she questioned the veracity of the claim. The MRI reported that the droid was capable of feeling confused and angered. That particular aspect was checked off the lab technician's list.

Also "checked off' the lab technician's list was the ability to breathe properly when Androgyne strangled him a few moments later.

He had told her that she was not human – that her ability to recall basic prior events was not a function built into her programming.

The technician was not lying.

All of these things were true. Once powered off for energizing, the Androgyne system underwent a "crypt-wipe' – ergo, it forgot everything it ever knew in an instant.

When Androgyne 1.0 learned of her non-human status, she flipped out and attacked the technician. It took fifteen of his colleagues around three minutes, which is a very long time by anyone's measurements, to pull the droid off the man and power her down.

The off switch was relocated in the recent 2.2 upgrade – from inside the left thigh, to the forearm, complete with protective casing.

It was a commonly held misconception that Androgyne would be readily available for home use by the year 2110. Due to its violent and erratic nature, it was sold to USARIC by Manning/Synapse for $10 bn for exclusive space exploration use.

The lab technician continues to eat his meals through a straw some sixteen years later…

* * *

Wool ar-Ban spent a good hour or so chasing Jelly around the mid-section of the vessel. The cat had had a good work out and felt fatigue start to set in.

Jelly found her way, quite by accident, to Botanix. She clawed at the glass door, wanting to get into the vast green playground that tempted her from the other side of the screen door. It was an area she remembered well from the tour of the ship.

A place to play.

Wool stepped after her and placed her hands on her hips. “You want to go in and see the plants?”

“Meow.”

Jelly ran her claws along the glass a second time, demanding satisfaction.

The door slid open before Wool had a chance to explain to her new feline friend that it might not be a good idea.

“Jelly,” Haloo emerged from behind her computer terminal and chuckled as Jelly darted through the first row of plants. “Oh, my. She’s a curious one, isn’t she?”

“Thanks for opening the door, Haloo,” Wool said, sarcastically. “We’ll never catch her, now.”

“Ah, she’ll be fine,” Haloo watched Jelly rummage around the soil, looking for something to kill. “The exit doors are closed. She can’t get lost in here.”

“How is everything?” Wool asked.

“Still turning carbon dioxide into oxygen if that’s what you mean.”

Wool took in the impressive view of various plant life. The rows were illuminated by a set of powerful lamps hanging from the ceiling.

“Would you like some fresh H_2O?”

“Yes,” Wool followed Haloo over to a unit in the corner of the room. “Jelly’s tiring herself out. She’s already had a go on my inner-suit.”

“Got some sharp claws on her, huh?”

“You could say that,” Wool inspected her sleeve and tugged a string of fabric away. “She must be thirsty.”

“Call her over. I’ll fix a saucer for her.”

Haloo pressed a button on the machine and held a paper cup under the nozzle. The unit hummed to life and released a jet of ice-cold water.

“Here, get your lips around this.”

“Thanks.

Wool took a sip and felt a shiver roll down her spine. “Mmm. That’s crazy good.”

“I know, right?”

Jelly snaked in and out of the bamboo plants. She bent over and patted her knees “Jelly? Come here, girl.”

“Meow.”

Jelly was too preoccupied with her new playground to obey any orders.

Haloo shook her head and giggled. “How on Earth did she pass the obedience test?”

“No idea.”

“This is silly,” Haloo stood up straight and removed a paper cone from the holder. She slid her fingernail under the glue and fanned the paper out, bending the edges around the outskirts. “Maybe she’ll respond to this.”

Haloo held the makeshift paper saucer under the water nozzle and filled it half way.

“Ooh, you’re good,” Wool chuckled. “I’ll have a refill after you’re done with her.”

“Sure,” Haloo set the half-full paper saucer onto the floor and squatted in front of it. She clapped her hands together and whistled. “Jelly? Come, get some fresh.”

“Meow.”

Jelly knew exactly what was on offer and ran out from the plants. She screeched to a halt on her paws and helped herself to the water.

“Good girl,” Haloo smiled, aiding Jelly’s drinking session by rubbing her back. “You’re such a cute little thing, aren’t you?”

“Don’t let her charming exterior fool you, Haloo,” Wool laughed and refilled her paper cone. “She’s a vicious little thing when she wants to be’

“Yes, but she’s *our* vicious little thing,” Haloo giggled and ran her palm over Jelly’s head as she drank from the saucer. “When is she due for installation?”

“The Infinity Claws operation only takes twenty minutes, but she’ll need about two hours of R and R after we’re done.”

“How’s her paw-eye coordination?”

“Did you see her entrance a few minutes ago?” Wool licked her lips with excitement. “It’s spot on.”

“Aww.”

Haloo couldn’t resist Jelly’s adorableness. “Such a *good* little girl, aren’t you? Yes. Yes, you are.”

Jelly purred loudly as she sucked down the last drop of water.

“Come here,” Haloo scooped Jelly under her stomach and cradled her in her arms. She looked down at the cute face staring up at her.

The light from the lamps reflected across Jelly’s eyes. Haloo brushed her thumb over the cat’s face, feeling the soft, voluminous fur.

“Beautiful creature, you are. So healthy. So *alive*.”

Wool smiled and tossed the paper cone in the recycle bin next to the dispenser. “She’s the most perfect cat I’ve ever met in that respect. Not a blemish. Absolutely nothing wrong with her. A truly unique specimen.”

“That little boy back home must be missing her,” Haloo said, finding it difficult to tear her eyes away from Jelly’s face. “I feel sorry for him. What was his name?”

"Jamie."

"Yeah, I remember now. Jamie."

"He knows she's in good hands. We'll look after her."

"Yes, we will," Hallo moved her nose onto Jelly's and kissed her on the head.

"Meow." Jelly rubbed her face on Haloo's and licked the ends of her hair.

"Oh. She doesn't do that with me!" Wool said, pretending to take offense. "Well, well, well… talk about allegiance."

"Ha," Haloo chuckled, pulling Jelly's mouth away from her face, "Well, it could be because I have cleaner hair than you."

"Dry shampoo?" Wool snorted held out her hands, "I doubt that. Can I have her back, now?"

"Sure."

Haloo passed Jelly back to her. The cat licked her lips and got comfy in Wool's arms.

"Swing by Medix when you have time. Don't be a stranger."

"I will," Haloo smiled and waved at Jelly. "Bye-bye, sweetie. Have a good operation."

"Meow."

USARIC Weapons & Armory

Space Opera Beta – Level Four

A metal boot slammed to the floor.

The laces tightened across the tongue of the boot and squeezed shut. The foot stomped onto the ground three times.

"Pure titanium, that is," Jaycee said, looking down at his leg. "Absolutely impenetrable."

Baldron Landaker stood beside him, impressed with his colleague's footwear. "What's that got to do with weapons?"

"This." Two barrels swung out from the sides of the boot and armed themselves. "Stand back."

"Okay."

Jaycee lifted his knee and aimed it down the shooting gantry.

BLAM-BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!

Two bullets fired out alternately from each cylinder and hit the silhouetted mannequin target. Bits of plastic flew in all directions. Even at a clear fifty-foot distance, the boots provided a remarkably accurate shot.

Baldron wafted the bullet residue away from his face and pulled the creases out from his inner-suit. "So, if we come across any tangos,

we just shoot them with our feet?"

"No, the footwear is for me. I just want you to know I have them."

"Understood."

"Katz wanted me to show you the firepower, so here it is," Jaycee snapped his fingers. "Manuel?"

The holographic book appeared in the air and hovered around, awaiting instructions. "Yes, Jaycee?"

"Captain Katz has asked me to acclimatize Mr Landaker here with our arsenal. Can you avail Armory One, please?"

"Certainly."

The book flickered into nothingness as Jaycee marched away from the shooting range and into the armory proper. Four bays stood before them, ensconced in the wall.

"Opening bay one…" Manuel's voice advised.

"Wait till you see this," Jaycee smirked as the bay doors slid open.

Baldron watched in wonder as an infinite assortment of weapons revealed themselves.

"What kinda guy are you?" Jaycee asked, approaching the first bay.

"Eh?" Baldron double-took, snapping out of his mire. "What kinda guy am I?"

"Yeah, you know, slow and measured? Or run-in-and-flank-on-a-whim-and-a-prayer type of guy?"

"Oh," Baldron said, "I've flanked a few back in my service days."

"And they thought you were the best for Opera Beta?"

"I guess so."

"You don't convince me. I can see I'll have to test you."

Jaycee unhooked a particularly vicious heavy machine gun from within the first bay. He threw the side lever down and cocked the barrel.

"Do you know what this is?"

"A gun?" Baldron tried.

"Very funny," Jaycee flipped the catch down and slammed the under-barrel into his left palm. His right hand squeezed the grip, forcing his index finger around the trigger. "This here is the K-SPARK. Flick the switch down for semi-auto, flip it center for the single-most devastating proton blast the galaxy has ever seen. Don't point it at anything you *don't* want destroyed. Here."

He passed the behemoth to Baldron, who buckled slightly under its sheer weight. "Whoa, this is heavy."

"Yeah, it's not exactly user-friendly. You should be used to the weight, right? Being an engineer?"

“Definitely. It’s not *that* heavy.”

“Good. It’s not my weapon of choice for mobility, but when this baby is ground mounted it’ll fend off swathes of bad guys.”

Jaycee watched on as Baldron tried to wrap his finger around the trigger. “Be careful with that, pal.”

“Why?”

Jaycee flicked the side switch up, locking the trigger down. “I have a feeling if you fire this baby, it’ll jump out of your hands.”

“Yeah,” Baldron passed the gun back to Jaycee and took note of his huge frame in the process. “Well, not all of us are seven foot and built like a brick house.”

“And don’t forget it,” Jaycee moved to the second bay and grabbed a cylindrical device from the shelf. “Do you know what the difference is between a smart bomb and a dumb bomb?”

He pushed the black grenade into Baldron’s chest. “Ugh, no?”

“A smart bomb can be deactivated once the pin is pulled.”

Baldron inspected the black grenade. “And a dumb bomb can’t?”

“Correct.”

Jaycee pulled the pin out of the grenade, causing Baldron to soil himself. “Guess which one you’re holding?”

“Uh, the smart bomb?”

“Nope,” Jaycee slammed the pin back into the grenade and snatch it out of his trainee’s hand. “That would’ve been a dumb move. Smart bombs are black. Dumb bombs are red. Remember that.”

“Okay.”

“Right, firearms. Ones that won’t slow you down,” Jaycee returned his K-SPARK onto its holster. “We have to start you somewhere. I tell you what. We’ll KISS it.”

“Kiss it?”

“KISS. Keep It Simple Stupid,”

Jaycee reached for a mini hand gun in the third bay and threw it into his right hand.

“The Rez-9. The lightest firearm we have. Standard issue release mechanism. One hundred per magazine. Once you’re used to it it’ll take three seconds to reload.”

Jaycee slid the catch back and tilted his at the sight on the weapon. “Two spares sit in the housing for easy refill. See what you think of this.”

He tossed it to Baldron, who caught it clumsily in his hands.

“Be careful you don’t blow your thighs open, there.”

“Sorry.” Baldron held the gun in his hand and pointed it at Jaycee. “Put your hands up, sucker.”

Jaycee chuckled to himself and held up his hands. “Oh no, you caught me. What did I do wrong, officer?”

“Ha.”

Without warning nor notice, Jaycee swiped the barrel out of Baldron’s hands, locked his arm around his back and buried the barrel into his temple.

“Agh, help. Help.”

“Don’t you ever, *ever*, point a weapon at people you work with. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, yes,” Baldron squirmed in Jaycee’s clutches. “I u-understand. Please let me g-go—”

Jaycee yanked his arm up his back and cocked the gun, threatening to blow Baldron’s brains out.

“—What’s your role on this vessel, cadet?”

“I’m… I’m Beta’s engineer, sir.”

“First Lieutenant, Mr Landaker,” Jaycee shouted in his ear, angrily, “I’m not a sir. What’s the first rule of USARIC’s Infinity Claws, one point one?”

“What?” Baldron asked, about to soil himself. Death was a hair trigger away.

“I said what is the first point in USARIC’s Infinity Claws?”

“That all v-ventures be manned appropriately with just cause and for the benefit of mankind.”

“That’s right. Good work,” Jaycee released the man and returned the Rez-9 firearm to the first bay.

Jaycee patted Baldron on the back, trying to coax him out of his impending coronary. “I like you, you’re funny.”

“I think you broke my arm.”

“That’s okay, you know how to replace a damaged limb, don’t you?,” Jaycee pushed Baldron in the chest with his huge fist. “Just remember what I said. No funny business.”

“Okay, okay,” Baldron squirmed. “I’d have to be out of my mind picking a fight with you.”

“That’s the second thing you’ve got right. Never forget it,” Jaycee stormed away from the armory. “I’ll show you the rest of the arsenal later. Let’s get you strapped up and see how good your aim is.”

Jaycee stormed out of the room, leaving a petrified Baldron quaking himself in his shoes. He looked down at his hand, thankful that Jaycee hadn’t seen him swipe a red dumb bomb from the cabinet.

He tucked it in his inner-suit pocket and walked after him.

CHAPTER TEN

Medix

Space Opera Beta – Level three

"Jelly? Can you hear me?"

It was pitch dark. All the cat could hear was Wool's voice.

A sound of whirring emitted from her claws. Something felt weird.

"Jelly, sweetie? Open your eyes."

A thin sliver of light crept into her retinas, revealing a pair of blurred paws in front of her face.

"Meow."

The claws were not a dull gray as she'd expected. Now, they were a special kind of silver. She pulled her claws in and back out.

An additional side-claw had been clamped to both paws. She moved the tendons back and forth on all four cuticles. A mechanical whirring occurred with each swift action.

Wool peered into view and smiled. "How are you feeling?"

Jelly rolled onto her side and caught sight of her inner-skin suit. The name *J. Anderson* was written on the side.

A specially-designed scratch post at the foot of her surgery bed.

"Meow," Jelly tried to take off her new claws. She needed to use the set on her other paw to do it, but it was no use. After giving up, she made her way to the wiry scratch post and dug her shiny new claws right in, stretching them away from her paw.

It felt better.

But those dastardly metallic and sharp additions confused her.

"Opposable thumbs," Wool said, rubbing her finger underneath them. She turned the other way to grab something from the surgery bench.

Jelly looked up and managed to make her "thumbs' move, but didn't have a clue what to do with them, or how to use them.

Wool produced a squishy rubber ball in her hand. She pinched it between her thumb and forefinger. "See?"

"Meow," Jelly tilted her head and observed Wool squeezing the ball in her hand.

"Catch," Wool dropped the ball on the bed. Jelly went for it. Instead of catching it in her paw, she accidentally batted it away.

"No, no," Wool caught it as it rolled off the edge of the bench.

“Try again. Here…”

Wool rolled the ball gently toward Jelly. She pressed her stomach to the surface of the bed and eyed it with intent.

Waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Then, she launched forward and grabbed the ball with both paws, the thumb cuticles going largely to waste.

The pads on her paws kept the ball in place as Jelly sniffed around, ensuring it wouldn’t strike back.

“This is going to take some time to get used to, isn’t it?”

“Meow,” Jelly opened her mouth and sunk her fangs into the ball, playing with it.

Katz’s voice appeared in Wool’s ear. “Wool, are we ready, yet?”

“Yes,” she held her finger to her ear, “She’s awake and relatively sedentary.”

“Glad to hear it. Can we proceed?”

“I think so,” Wool held out her hand for the ball. Jelly played with it, reticent to let it go so soon. “Give me the ball, Jelly.”

The cat whined and covered it with her paw. She wasn’t done with it just yet.

“Jelly, don’t make me ask twice.”

“Wool?” Katz asked, “What are you doing? Are you talking to Anderson?”

“I’m waiting for her to stop playing the fool,” Wool shot Jelly a stern look and clicked her fingers. “Now, please.”

“Meow,” Jelly scanned the ball and decided to let it go. Quite by accident, she clutched the ball using her new thumbs and rolled it back to Wool.

“Good girl,” Wool pocketed it and held out her arms, beckoning Jelly into them. “Let’s go and do some work.”

The Manuel

The Speed of Thought

Pg 773,313

(exposition dump #779/7a)

Pure Genius *is a super-computer. Invented by USARIC, it became a revolutionary communication device which changed the course of the future and, in some cases, even the past.*

Shortly before his death, Pascal D’Souza worked with USARIC to

develop a logical system of interpretation. The result was Pure Genius, *a room that harnessed every emotion, physicality and attribute of the being in question.*

First to use Pure Genius *was D'souza himself. He and his team invented the Genius Drive that harnessed one of the twenty-first century's greatest findings* – The Speed of Thought – *a speed several times faster than the commonly regarded* Speed of Light.

The Speed of Thought*'s speed is approximately 788,501,118 miles per second.*

Until October of 2110, humans believed that nothing could travel faster than light. Saturn Cry changed all this when it was decoded by D'Souza. Light, being a physical utility was limited because of its tangibility. The first clue that "things' could travel faster than the speed of light was a concept developed by USARIC.

To understand this concept better, it is useful to conduct the following experiment:

1: Imagine a picture of a black cat. Do you see it?

2: The image you thought of took approximately 0.2478 seconds to appear, which is ten times faster than the speed of light.

3: The ability to transmit said image to another location is just as fast.

The intangible – electronic messages, for example – and hyper-connectivity with the Outernet were sent at a rate way faster than 186, 282 miles per hour; the approximate speed of light. The ability to transmit data through space and time became the exemplar for The Speed of Thought.

The discovery was the backbone of Pure Genius *during its conception. It devised the concept of travel along ripples through the fabric of space and time. A wholly remarkable discovery, and one that would set a precedent for scientific discovery hence.*

It was little surprise that USARIC, under the guidance of D'Souza, named this facility Pure Genius.

Not only did it change space exploration, it also improved commercial flights and communication in general. The International Moon Station was able to detect Saturn Cry because of it…

Pure Genius

Space Opera Beta – Level Five

Wool carried Jelly into Pure Genius. A cylinder-shaped room with several fluorescent tiles lit up on the floor, cylindrical wall and ceiling.

Apart from an almost indecipherable low-emission hum, the place was immaculate and completely devoid of sound.

In truth, it was a little eerie.

Wool stood in the middle and looked around, trying to figure out where the door she had walked through was. The tiles seemed to blend into each other. It was quite typical for a person entering Pure Genius to become quickly disoriented.

The chilling effect of the light and pure silence disturbed Jelly. It was possibly the first time either she, or Wool, had been in such a place of sheer tranquility.

“Tor?” Wool scanned the surrounding tiles. “We’re here.”

One of the tiles on the ceiling slid open, releasing the hum of Space Opera Beta into the room for a short time.

“Yes, I know. I’m here, too.”

“Where are you? This place is freaking me out. I don’t want to be in here any longer than necessary.”

“I’m up here,” Tor climbed into the cylinder from the open tile in the ceiling. “Whatever you do, don’t jump. Stay out of dead-center or you’ll get pulled apart.”

“I don’t intend to move, Tor.”

Gravity didn’t behave in the way people are accustomed to within Pure Genius. Each surface had its own pull, which served to exacerbate the feeling of unease.

Tor walked down the curvature of the wall and stepped onto what Wool knew to be the ground.

“Glad you could make it,” Tor took out a screen and stretched it from his hand. “We’re going to have to leave Jelly in here by herself while we conduct the decoding.

“Okay.”

“Can you set her down, please?”

Wool squatted to the ten by ten floor tile and released Jelly onto it. She looked at her tail and followed it around for a few seconds, trying to attack it with her infinity claws.

Tor chuckled as he looked at his screen. “How’s she getting on with her new toy?”

“She’s taken to Infinity Claws remarkably well. No allergies, no reactions.”

“Did she figure out how to use her thumbs, yet?”

“Not yet,” Wool puckered her lips at Jelly as she trailed around, meowing at her own behind.

“Okay, let’s start,” Tor looked up at the ceiling and barked out a command. “Pure Genius. Cuboid, twelve-eight-six.”

Jelly sat on her hind legs and licked her paws.

“Right, let’s go,” Tor clutched his screen and planted his foot on the curve of the wall. “It’s okay, follow me. It’s perfectly safe.”

“I trust you,” Wool smiled and stepped onto the wall, following

behind Tor as he walked to the open tile in the ceiling.

He stepped through and offered Wool a helping hand. “Just through here.”

“Will Jelly be okay?”

“She’s perfectly fine,” Tor said, “Take my hand, and prepare for a little disorientation.”

He pulled her through, allowing the tile to slide shut behind their exiting the room.

Jelly looked around at the brightly lit tiles and squinted. One of them began to change shape.

All the others changed, too. Very slowly.

The cylinder flattened out and folded onto itself, startling Jelly. “Meoowww…”

The corners of the flat surface branched out and locked together, forming a cuboid structure all around her from every angle.

The silence was completely deafening.

For Jelly, it wasn’t a matter of escape. If she wanted to run away, she wouldn’t be too sure she’d run back to the same place.

So, she did what any cat would have done under the circumstances – she made for what she thought was the door. One of many of perfectly-squared tiles measuring ten by ten feet.

When she arrived, she hopped onto it, surprised that it had its own gravity. The *door* had become the floor.

Jelly whined and looked around. Six walls, a ceiling and a floor, all containing twenty-four tiles.

“Jelly?” Tor’s voice buzzed into the room. She shrieked and jumped into the air, wondering where the voice came from. “Shh, it’s okay, girl. Calm down.”

Tor sat at the Pure Genius deck with an audience watching the screen from behind.

Bonnie, Wool, Jaycee, Haloo, Baldron, and Katz were captivated by the visual of Jelly in the cuboid on the large screen.

“Activating Saturn Cry,” Tor said, hitting a button on the console. The familiar static-hiss started to play.

“What’s going on?” Bonnie asked. “Can she hear it?”

“Yes, the message is coming at her from all directions,” Tor said. “We’re closer to the source of the signal, so she’s in a position to respond due to the strength and quality.”

A twang of an electric guitar shot through the room.

Jelly jumped into the air as a visual waveform of the guitar twang flew around her. She landed on the adjacent tile, somewhat

disappointed that she hadn't caught the fleeting waveform.

"Nine… ten," Tor said, analyzing his controls, "Eleven… and…"

WHUMP.

A blast of pink audio illuminated the cube. Jelly tossed herself into the air and tried to claw at it. She shrieked at the top of her lungs and landed onto what she knew to be the ceiling.

Her paws hit the tile, pressing it like a button. It turned pink and displayed a readout in the middle of the cuboid.

"Amaziant. Someone take a note of that," Tor looked at Baldron, who unfolded his screen and scribbled down the set of numbers:

1691411

"Coordinates?"

"Could be," Tor said, raising the volume of the audio message. "Hang on. Fifteen… sixteen…"

"We're waiting for the twentieth second?" Tripp asked. "The second bump?

"Yes, shh."

The guitar sound crept into the hiss and struck three successive chords.

The second *whump* blasted around the cuboid, scaring Jelly across the middle of the structure.

Another blast of pink light zipped from her previous tile to the one directly opposite. She tried to catch it, but it was far too fast for her.

The pink waveform splashed against the tile, moving out for Jelly to land against it.

The tile lit up and produced another number.

"Meow," Jelly dug her hind legs into the tile and rolled over, angry with herself.

"Baldron," Tor said, "Capture the result, please."

"Got it," he said, writing it down. "One, niner, two, five, one, three, one, six."

"Nineteen and thirteen are prime numbers," Haloo said, "But the others aren't."

"We're clearly not dealing with an intelligent life form, whatever it is," Tripp said. "What do we know of these coordinates?"

"We don't know yet till we reach the twenty-sixth second," Baldron looked at the screen and poised himself, ready to capture the next set of numbers.

The hiss died down, replaced by four successive chords from the

sound that resembled an electric guitar chord.

"Twenty-four. Twenty-five…" Tor muttered, "And…"

Whump.

Jelly didn't know where to turn. The cuboid room seemed to revolve on its axis, tipping her away from her tile.

She shrieked and dug her thumb claw into the side of the tile, clinging on for dear life.

A third and final pink image screeched around the center of Pure Genius, toying with Jelly.

She propelled herself from the tile and flew toward the haze of warbled pink sound, intending to ravage it.

"What is that, it sounds familiar?" Bonnie asked.

"Da-da-da-dum," Wool hummed to herself. "Like Beethoven's fifth?"

"No, that's impossible—" Katz said.

"—Anything is possible," Tor kept his eye on the screen. "Keep watching."

Jelly burst through the pink cloud and purred, suspended in the center of the room. Her metal whiskers buzzed to life, causing an electrical spark. Her face pushed back under her hind legs.

"What's happening to her?"

"That third and final bump," Tor pointed at the screen. "Look, it's disappeared."

Jelly hit the ceiling and meowed as loud as she could. The tile flashed under her feet, upsetting her.

"That's enough. Get her out of that room," Wool went to walk away, only for Baldron to keep her back.

"No, it's over. We're done. Anderson's safe."

"That stupid room is scaring her."

"Be quiet, Wool," Tor said, punching the three lit-up tiles into the computer. "Here we go. Panels twelve, twenty… and twenty-six."

Everyone held their breath. Katz leaned into the screen and watched Jelly licking her paws, quite happy with herself.

"Twelve, twenty, twenty-six?" he said.

"Yep," Tor smiled. "The exact points in the message where those bumps happen.

"But what does that—"

The final set up of numbers appeared in the middle of the room.

8151425

"Got that, Baldron?" Tor asked.

“Yep, the entire string is complete.”

“Get her out of there,” Tor looked over to Wool. “Make sure you grab her once she’s out. She’s likely to be upset. Bring her down slowly.”

“Right,” Wool marched off toward the door. “Open it up.”

“Okay, all we have to do is feed the coordinates into Pure Genius and see what the result is. Should take about an hour.”

“An hour?” Tripp asked. “Why so long?”

“We’re expecting over a trillion permutations. It could be less but, either way, we need to give it time to analyze the data.”

The door to Pure Genius slid open, revealing Jelly sitting on the ceiling.

“Meow.”

Wool look up and held out her arms. “Hey, Jelly. Come to me.”

She purred and remained seated, licking at her right paw.

“Don’t play the fool, Jelly. You can’t stay in there all day,” Wool snapped her fingers. “Let’s go, come on.”

Wool returned to the crew with Jelly in her arms. Everyone applauded and cheered.

“Well done, Anderson,” Katz said. “Not just a pretty face, huh?”

Tor and Baldron high-fived each other and watched Jelly snake around the ankles of her new friends.

“She did well,” Tor said.

Jelly didn’t seem particularly happy with him. She crouched back and snarled with a furious bushy tail.

“Whoa,” Tor stepped back and held out his hands. “Don’t take it so personally, Anderson.”

She snarled and threatened to pounce on him. Wool lifted her up by her stomach before she could act.

“Meow.”

“Hey, girl,” Wool cradled her and rubbed her nose against Jelly’s head. “Let’s get you your medicine, yes? Let you run around for a while.”

* * *

Jelly sat upright on her bed looking at Wool. She inspected the cat’s face and pressed her thumbs down under her eyes.

“You seem okay,” Wool whispered, “It must have been weird being in that nasty room, right?”

“Meow,” Jelly rubbed her face on Wool’s wrist.

“I know, sweetie. You did well.”

“So, you’re going to take this,” Wool produced a white circular pill and held it flat in her palm. “It’ll help with your digestion.”

“Meow,” Jelly sniffed around at the pill but decided not to slurp it up.

“Come on,” Wool grabbed Jelly’s chin. “It’s for your own good.”

She opened the cat’s mouth and plonked the pill inside. “Good girl, swallow.”

She ran her knuckle up and down Jelly’s neck, forcing her to gulp it down.

Observation Deck

One hour later…

Tripp enjoyed a cup of coffee, looking through the giant transparent dome.

Saturn hung in the array of stars, surrounded by its many moons. Enceladus stood out among them, indicated by a red digital reticule stretched over the transparent window.

Next to it, behaving like a satellite, Tripp made out the cone-shaped Space Opera Alpha.

He took a sip of coffee, lost in his own thoughts. A picture of his son and wife appeared on the screen.

“No, thanks, Manuel.”

“I thought you may want a reminder,” Manuel’s voice suggested.

“No, sometimes it’s just better without visual aids.”

“Very well. You know where I am if you need me.”

“Yes. Thanks.”

The image of his family vanished, pulling Saturn’s vastness into view.

“Meow.”

Tripp turned around and watched Jelly saunter into the observation deck. “Oh, hey girl. What are you doing here?”

She ran the side of her face along his shin, wanting attention.

“You want a hug?” Tripp chuckled and set his coffee down. “Yeah. I know the feeling.”

He lifted Jelly into his arms and caught a glimpse of Wool by the door. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You okay, Wool?”

“I’m fine. Jelly seems to be curious about the observation deck.”

“So you caved in and let her visit?”

“Something like that,” Wool chuckled to herself, “Need a bit of

time to myself. Can she stay here with you for a little while?"

"Sure."

Wool smiled and moved off, leaving Jelly in Tripp's capable hands. It wasn't long before he felt the urge to talk to her.

"See that up there?" Tripp asked Jelly, "That's Saturn. Those are her rings, look. Big and beautiful. A bit like you."

Jelly snuggled into his arms and lifted her head. Her internal engine fired up, emitting a healthy purr.

She watched as Tripp grabbed the lever. He pressed his thumb on the side of the handle and shifted the observation dome a few clicks to the right.

Space Opera Alpha came into view in the distance.

"That little white dot is our friends. They got lost, so we're going to help them. You're very good at helping our friends aren't you?"

Jelly licked her paw, tracing her tongue up the side of her new Titanium thumb.

"Yes, you are."

She began to feel restless and pawed at his sleeves.

"You want down?" Tripp asked. "Okay, I have a seat here just for you."

Manuel's holograph appeared, startling Jelly out of Tripp's arms. She landed on the recliner and looked up at the stars.

"Tripp, Daryl would like you and the crew to meet him at the hub."

"What, now?"

"Yes, right now. They have the results and wish to share their findings with you."

"Wow, that was fast."

He was about to collect Jelly but had second thoughts. It seemed she was having a private moment. She was safe in the observation deck. What harm could a little isolation do while he visited the hub?

"I'll leave you in peace, Jelly. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Jelly never looked back. She turned her head, taking in the incredible view. "Meow."

"Good girl. I'll be back in a moment."

Tripp opened the door and exited the observation deck.

Jelly scrunched her nose as she took in the bright stars scattered across the unending chasm of space. She couldn't find what she was looking for, however.

In front of her stood the observation deck controls. A yellow joystick the size of a human fist begged to be played with.

"Meow," Jelly tried to talk to it, but it didn't move.

Perhaps a little tap might make it do something?

Jelly pressed the paw to the side, knocking the stick left. The observation deck swiveled for a second, shifting the view of Saturn over to the right.

Jelly considered what had happened. If she hit the stick, Saturn would move again.

And, so, it did.

She pressed her paw against the side, this time keeping it held down longer.

The stars struck out like a sloppy string of ink across the black canvas. The giant Jupiter moved across.

Jelly released the stick and raised her ears. “Meow.”

Curious, she pressed the stick to the left once again. A tiny blue star caught her attention. It seemed so far away.

“Meow.”

Little did Jelly know that the reflection in her eyeball was Earth. Nearly a billion miles away. Her mouth opened, the sense of awe hitting her deep inside.

Nevertheless, home was home. Of course, her homing instincts were far beyond her ability to get home all by herself. But that small dot that glimmered in the distance was where she knew she should be.

Not stuck in a cone-shaped vessel made of advanced ceramic hundreds of thousands of miles away from its final destination…

Back on Earth…

Jamie sat on the tiny brick wall in his back garden, holding his mini-telescope in his hands.

He extended it and held the small end to his eye. “There’s the moon.”

Jamie adjusted the lens and a series of craters, came into focus. “The man on the moon.”

“Jamie, poppet,” his mother’s voice drifted from the kitchen door. “Come in for your dinner.”

“Yes, mom.”

“And can you collect your sister’s bottle from the counter, please?”

“Okay, mom,” Jamie tapped the thick end of the telescope in his hand. “You’ll be there by now, Jelly.”

He moved the small end of the device to his eye and settled on a shimmering blue dot amongst the stars. “I have a new daddy, now. Just like you.”

He removed the telescope and held it between his legs. He pursed his lips and considered the events of the past twelve months.

“I’ll wait for you, Jelly.” He stood up and took one final look at the starry sky. A lump formed in his throat. “I should never have let you go. I miss you…”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Crew Hub

Staff briefing

The entire crew took their seats around the table.

"We have the results from Pure Genius," Tor said.

"So, what's the skinny?" Bonnie asked.

Tor waved his hand. A string of numbers displayed over the conference table.

Androgyne was the last crew member to enter the room, dressed in her USARIC outer-skin. "Captain Katz?"

"Yes, Androgyne?"

"I am ready to board Opera Alpha."

"So I see," Katz turned to Tor, who waited for the chance to present his findings. "We have an update. Please listen carefully."

Tripp took Jelly from Wool and cradled her in his arms. "What did we find?"

"Take a look at these numbers," Tor said.

169141119251316815142 5

"Okay?" Wool said, "What of them?"

"This is what we flushed into Pure Genius. Along with Manuel, she scanned for every known linguistic permutation we are aware of. It took Pure Genius less than ten minutes to run its algorithm."

"Why?" Katz asked.

"Because the answer was staring us in the face all along. Unusually simple, which may or may not reflect the intelligence of whatever we're dealing with."

Tor pushed the tops of his hands together and spread the numbers out.

16 9 14 11 19 25 13 16 8 15 14 25

“Twelve individual numbers,” Tor explained. “Can anyone see the pattern, here?”

The crew looked along the string. It didn’t take Androgyne very long to figure out what it meant. “Oh, yes. It is simple.”

“Exactly,” Tor smiled. “Anyone else?”

“Eleven,” Haloo smiled and picked out the relevant numbers, “Nineteen and thirteen. Primary numbers?”

“True, but that’s not the point,” Tor said, “But you’re looking in the wrong place. Take a step back and look at them again.”

“I don’t understand?” Haloo said, dismayed by her lack of understand. “Step back?”

“Androgyne?” Tor turned to her and pointed at the numbers. “Would you like to explain?”

“Certainly.”

She walked over to the table and pointed at the first two-digit number. “The sixteenth letter of the alphabet. P.”

“Oh,” Bonnie now understood the answer. “What’s the ninth letter?”

“I,” said Tripp. “Which means fourteen is N.”

“And there you have it,” Tor snapped his finger. Each number spun around revealing their corresponding letter.

PINKSYMPHONY

Baldron joined Tor and snapped his fingers. “Pink Symphony. It explains the color of the waveform we saw while Jelly was in Pure Genius extracting the data.”

“Yes, it was pink,” Katz said.

“What does Pink Symphony mean?” Jaycee asked.

“We don’t know.”

“So what use is it to us?”

Tor turned to Baldron. “I’ll let my colleague explain.”

Baldron pushed the test aside and brought up a live visual feed of Enceladus. A live visual feed of Enceladus appeared in an inset in at the top of the screen. “How long till we reach Alpha, Katz?”

“A little under an hour.”

“Okay,” Baldron pointed at the live feed of Enceladus. “Here, one of USARIC’s Star Drones currently orbiting Enceladus. This image is live but on a two-minute delay. If you look closely at the dark side, you may see something occurring right in the middle.”

Baldron enlarged the image, revealing a small pink dot. It appeared to breathe in and out from within the darkness.

“It’s pink,” Tripp dropped Jelly to the conference table. “Is that something to do with the deciphering of the message?”

“Again, we don’t know,” Baldron offered.

Bonnie felt her patience reach an end. “Well, what *do* you know?”

A vector image of Enceladus appeared next to the visual representation of Alpha. A dotted line shot out from the center of the moon and marched its way to the transmitter on Opera Alpha.

“We know that Enceladus is using Alpha as a transmitter,” Baldron explained. “Somewhere deep in her core. It’s sending the source signal to Alpha and using her as a sort of repeater to strengthen its message.”

Tor stepped forward and pointed at the vector of Enceladus. “Before Alpha went to investigate Enceladus, the message received by IMS and Corpus Claudius was just a bunch of noise. Now, with the Saturn Cry going through Alpha, the signal is stronger and filtered.”

“Let me see if I have this correct,” Katz tried to make sense of what he was hearing. “The original message was designed to get Alpha to go to Enceladus. To figure out what was going on?”

“Yes,” Baldron said.

“With the express purpose of using Alpha as a transmitter to send a strengthened signal?”

“It seems so.”

“Why would it do that?” Katz asked.

“Who knows,” Tor said. “What we do know is that we got a response. A response that enabled us to get Anderson up here to make sense of the message. And it worked.”

Androgyne thought over the information for a second. “Whatever, or whoever, is sending that message clearly knows English. Numbers.”

“And music,” Wool added. “Could we have found life out here?”

“The probability of life out here is beyond calculation,” Androgyne said. “Even in this vicinity. Extended to neighboring galaxies. It’s not possible. And even if it were true, they wouldn’t know English.”

The team were perplexed. Faced with the daunting fact that Saturn Cry originated from a place where numbers and, more bizarrely, the English language was a known quantity.

“It’s futile to speculate any further,” Baldron said. “We’re due to dock with Alpha shortly. We’ll ask questions when we get there. The most likely explanation is that whoever, or whatever, is using Alpha to transmit their message has done so from what they’ve learned about her.”

“It explains why the code was so simple and easy to decrypt,” Tor rubbed his chin, thinking over his answer. “Yes, it makes sense. What we have here, Pink Symphony, is an answer to a question we do not

know."

"It is remarkable just how simple it was to decipher," Baldron said as the rest of the crew turned to Jelly. She licked her private parts in full view of them with nary a care in the world.

Or the galaxy.

"I'm sure one of us would have figured out given enough time," Wool offered the crew. "It wouldn't have taken a genius."

Tor and Baldron looked at Jelly, who stopped licking herself and looked up at them.

"It didn't," Tor quipped.

Rest & Recuperation

Space Opera Beta – Level Two

Space Opera Beta's mess hall was large enough to house a few beds and an effective kitchen counter set-up. A place for the crew to relax and maybe read a book or watch a movie.

Its primary function was to serve hot meals. Long gone were the days of having to drink through straws and eat from packets.

The kitchen contained all the essentials one could possibly want.

A kettle.

A microwave.

A wash basin.

An electric cooker.

A coffee machine capable of making fancy hot drinks.

The sprawling, rectangular table in the middle of the room contained assorted snacks. Three bowls of fruit hung from the ceiling, a few inches from the surface of the table top.

In the corner of the room, unofficially referred to as "hind quarters', was where Jelly went to the toilet. In many ways Jelly was spoiled aboard the Space Opera Beta.

She had a larger-than-necessary sleeping area with a mattress and sheets. A water dispenser released pure H_2O into a bowl on the hour, every hour.

Jelly lapped away at the water, washing down the contents of her lunch – a tuna and chicken medley. Her favorite.

Baldron waited for the coffee machine to reach its boil and took out two mugs from the cabinet.

"It's amaziant, really, when you think about. How much you miss the little things."

Katz turned to look at Jelly drinking from her bowl. "This time, we *do* have a little thing with us."

“Ha,” Baldron reached inside his pocket and took out a bunch of napkins. “That’s not quite what I meant.”

“I know,” Katzs chuckled. “Hey, Jelly. How you doing?”

She looked up from her bowl and meowed.

Katz, much like the majority of the crew, couldn’t resist the urge to talk cutesy at her. “You’re a good girl, aren’t you?”

“You take milk?” Baldron poured some of the white stuff into his mug.

“Yes, please. One sugar,” Katz cautiously approached Jelly and held out his arms. “Water’s good, huh?”

“One sugar,” Baldron whispered to himself as he fanned out the napkin. In the middle lay a black cyanide capsule. A quick check over his shoulder to ensure the captain couldn’t see him was all he needed.

“Coming right up.”

Jelly’s ears pricked up. She watched on as Baldron broke the two plastic ends and dropped the yellowy dust into the second, red USARIC-themed mug. He poured the hot coffee into it and watched the froth race up the sides of the ceramic and form along the surface.

Katz scooped Jelly up under her belly. “Ooh, gotta be careful. You’ve just eaten.”

“Meow.”

Baldron poured the coffee into his blue mug and replaced the coffee filter into its housing.

“I have to say, Daryl, that we’re very appreciative of everything you’ve done for us. You’ve been a real inspiration for the crew of Opera Beta.”

Katz, having seen nothing of Baldron’s sneaky move, approached the middle table and eyed his coffee. Jelly purred in his arms as he made a fuss over her.

“It’s not often you get to hear that from your own team. But thanks for saying that, it means a lot.”

Baldron smiled and nodded at the cat. “Anderson’s something else, isn’t she?”

“Oh, you can say that again.”

Jelly looked up at Baldron and showed him her fangs. She clung to Katz, wanting to be set free. Obligingly, he dropped her to the table.

“There you go, puss.”

Baldron made conversation, trying not to look at the two mugs. “So, not long to go now till we board Alpha.”

“Nope,” Katz said, looking at the two mugs of coffee. He reached out for the handle on the red mug nearest to him. Baldron suppressed his desire to celebrate that his plan was coming to fruition.

Jelly walked around the two mugs, sniffing the rim of each mug.

She whined and blinked up at Baldron.

"What are you looking at, Anderson?"

"Meow," she ran her face along the side of the piping hot red mug. The heat made her tear her face away and rub it with her paw. "Meeooowww."

"What's the matter, girl?" Katz asked, hooking his finger around the red mug handle. "You can't drink coffee, it's not good for you."

"Meow."

Baldron lifted his mug and offered to clink it against Katz's. "We have what we need, now. We solved the puzzle. Cheers."

"Yes, of course," Katz lifted the red mug and clinked it against Baldron's. "To Jelly Anderson."

"Yes, to Jelly Anderson."

As Baldron lifted the mug to his mouth, Jelly squealed and launched at him, scratching his forearm with her metal infinity claws.

"Oww!"

Baldron's mug tilted and spilled a few drops of coffee over the floor. Katz put the red mug down and accosted Jelly, who looked up at him with widened eyes.

"Bad cat," Katz said, taking the blue mug from Baldron's hand. Jelly hissed back at him.

"That damn creature is more trouble than she's worth," Baldron inspected his arm. The inner-skin had torn slightly. "Ugh, can't we just have her dealt with?"

He reached over the kitchen counter, tore off a sheet of paper from its holder and mopped his arm down.

"Dealt with?" Katz thought on his feet and looked at Jelly.

Baldron scrunched the paper and threw it into the basin. "Yes. *Dealt with.* We have everything we need from her. She's only getting in the way, now."

"Meow." Jelly somehow knew who the bad guy was in all of this.

Katz picked up the red mug, watching Jelly's face following the rim. "Here, take your drink back.."

"Thanks," Baldron took the red mug failing to realize that Katz had swapped them around.

Katz picked up the blue mug and lifted it to his lips. His mood flipped on a dime. "We'll deal with her when we return to Earth, I think."

"Fine," Baldron huffed and watched the tip of the blue mug rise as Katz sipped away at it. "But, but…"

"What's wrong, Baldron?" Katz said with a smile. "Not going to drink?"

"No, I—"

"Meow," Jelly shifted along the counter and yawned at Baldron

before allowing her stomach to growl.

Katz gulped down the rest of his drink and slammed it to the counter. He reached into his inner-skin suit flap with his right hand and watched Baldron with his red mug. “You must be parched, fella.”

“I, uh, suddenly don’t feel too well.”

“Oh,” Katz said, feigning sympathy, “Well, a bit of caffeine might perk you up a bit, right?”

Baldron didn’t know what to do. If he drank the coffee, he was dead. If he didn’t, he’d look very suspicious.

Katz clenched his fist within his inner-suit, losing his patience. Jelly completed the double-act by growling louder than before. They both wanted Baldron to drink whatever was in the red mug.

“Come on, drink up.”

Baldron closed his eyes and double-over himself, pretending to feel sick. “Ugh, must be something I ate. My stomach—”

He released the red mug from his hands

It shattered across the floor, spreading the fizzing, deadly contents around their shoes.

Katz took out his Rez-9 firearm and pointed it at Baldron.

Jelly squealed in the man’s face, backing her captain up.

“Cyanide?” Katz said, flicking the side catch down, enabling the gun to warm up. “You try to kill me on *my* ship?”

“I’m s-sorry, please don’t kill—”

“—Don’t say another word, Landaker,” Katz shifted the barrel of the gun to his face. Baldron put his hands in the air as Katz snapped his fingers with his free hand.

“Manuel.”

The holographic book appeared out of thin air and hovered around the kitchen counter. “Yes, Daryl?”

“Call Jaycee to R&R,” Katz said, “We have a problem here that needs to be *dealt with*.”

“No, please, don’t tell the others—”

“—I swear, Landaker. You say one more thing and I’ll blast your head off your shoulders. Don’t you make a move or say another word.”

Baldron hung his head in shame. The cyanide-infused coffee spat and sizzled around their feet, burning into the ground. Katz turned to Jelly. “Stay there, sweetie.”

“Meow,” Jelly snarled at Baldron.

* * *

Jaycee pushed Baldron down the vessel carriageway by the back

of his shoulders.

"Hey!"

"Shut up, killer," Jaycee's sheer size, made even larger on account of his exo-suit, somehow felt more threatening and deadly than ever before. He hulked his K-SPARK shot gun in his arms, enjoying tormenting his prisoner. "Get off the floor and walk."

Baldron scrambled to his feet and walked backwards along the corridor. "I swear, it was a mistake."

"The only mistake that was made was letting you on board, traitor," Jaycee lifted his behemoth of a gun and warmed it up. "Right between the eyes, if I had my way."

"Wh-where are you taking me?"

"Keep walking," Jaycee stormed forward, threatening to pulverize the poor guy. "If I had my way I'd put a proton charge right between your eyes. Then I'd take you to the airlock and flush you out of this ship along with all the other human waste."

"P-Please, d-don't kill me," Baldron pleaded for his life. At the far end of the corridor was the ship's prison – N-Carcerate.

"Crew of Opera Beta, may I have your attention, please?" Katz's voice came through the speakers in the corridor and vessel at large. "I regret to inform you that we have uncovered a traitor among us. Do not be concerned. Jaycee is dealing with him as we speak…."

Jaycee booted Baldron in the chest, sending him tumbling down the corridor, closer to N-Carcerate. "Congratulations, big man. You're famous."

Katz held the communication device in his hand. He kept on speaking as Tor watched on, utterly dumbfounded by the revelation.

Androgyne entered the room, looking around the control deck's walls, taking in the information.

"… communications second officer Baldron Landaker has been placed under arrest for attempted murder. He will be housed in N-Carcerate until we return home, where USARIC will deal with him. Please do not approach or attempt to communicate with him. Failure to comply with this order will be seen as a contravention of Infinity Clause twenty-five-point-five. Thank you. Katz, over and out."

Tor shook his head and felt like crying. "Baldron?"

"Yeah," Katz hooked the communicator to the flight deck. "Baldron Landaker. Tried to kill me."

"How?"

"Dropped his cyanide capsule into my drink. If it weren't for Jelly acting up, you'd be speaking to a corpse right now, under commander Tripp's directions."

"Unbelievable," Tor sat into his chair and looked at Androgyne.

“Uh, what will happen to him now?”

“He’ll spend the next eighteen months in N-Carcerate, twelve of them in hyper-sleep. When we get back, USARIC will try him on the evidence. Pretty compelling stuff. I wouldn’t be surprised if they execute him.”

“Wow,” Tor shook his head once again. “Did he say why he did it?”

“No.”

“Did you upset him?”

“No.”

“Why do you think he did it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he say why he did it?”

“What do you think, Tor? I don’t know.” Katz let out a violent exasperation. “Yeah, the second I asked nicely, he was all like “Oh, Daryl, I really love you, but you’re married, and if I can’t have you, no one can!” Idiot.”

“I’m sorry, Daryl,” Tor cleared his throat. He hadn’t seen this Katz’s wrath of venom before now. “I didn’t mean to—”

“—No, you didn’t *meant to*, whatever that means. No one ever *means to*,” Katz took a deep breath and felt sorry for his first comms officer. He was only trying to help, after all. “I’m sorry, Tor. I shouldn’t take it out on you. I’m a bit on edge.”

“Captain Katz?” Androgyne stood before him, dressed in her outer-suit. The helmet sat around her shoulders with the visor opened. “Should I proceed to the primary airlock?”

Katz took a deep breath and tried to acclimatize himself to his work environment. “Yes. Good idea. I’ll have Bonnie accompany you to disembarkation.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Androgyne turned around and made her way out of the control deck.

“Oh, and… Androgyne?”

“Yes, captain?”

“Watch your six,” Katz said, returning to his controls. “You never know where danger is going to spring from.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Primary Airlock

Space Opera Beta – Level One

Androgyne and Bonnie reached the primary airlock. Bonnie pressed her finger to her ear. “Okay, we’re all set.”

“Understood,” Katz voice advised, “When Androgyne reaches Alpha’s dock, all she has to do is press her glove to the out plate and it should open. Standby for bridge connection.”

Bonnie patted down Androgyne’s outer-skin, a thinner, silver spacesuit that clung to the skin like a pair of leggings. Androgyne’s helmet was more traditional – resembling a small goldfish bowl.

“You ready?”

“I’m scared, Dr. Whitaker.”

“Don’t be. We’re right behind you. Check your comms,” Bonnie nodded at her ear. “Speak.”

Androgyne flipped down her visor and locked to the rim of the helmet. An ear piece automatically folded around her mouth. “Can you hear me?”

Bonnie turned away to make sure she could hear her voice. “Yes, coming through loud a clear. You read me?”

“Yes,” Androgyne looked around inside her helmet. “You’re coming through crystal clear.”

The ship began to rumble.

Bonnie looked through the first door to the airlock. Through the second window, the bridge started to extend away from the ship, headed for the airlock on Space Opera Alpha.

“We don’t know what you’ll find in there.”

“Bonnie,” Katz interrupted through the headset. “Don’t intimidate the poor girl. Androgyne, can you read me?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Androgyne took in the enormity of what was about to happen. “When you board Alpha, we need to establish three things. One, that the ship is habitable for human life. Two, that Alpha’s on board Manuel is operational. He’s an older generation, so if he’s operational, you should expect some differences to our own.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Three, we need to know who survived. It’s that simple.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“Once we’ve established those three facts, we’ll join you and see what we can salvage and rescue. Androgyne?”

“I understand,” she whispered, staring through the airlock window, fearing for her life.

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” Katz said, “I want you to provide a running commentary at all times. If there’s a period of more than ten seconds of radio silence, we’ll assume something is wrong and act accordingly. You’re in safe hands.”

The primary airlock door slid to the side, allowing Androgyne inside.

“The bridge is ready,” Katz said, “Prepare to disembark.”

Bonnie held Androgyne’s shoulder and reassured her. “Good luck. Remember, keep in constant contact.”

“Yes.”

Androgyne took a deep breath and stepped into the airlock. The door slid behind her as she stood perfectly still. “I’m ready, Captain.”

“Good.”

Bonnie waved at her as the outer door opened onto the white, ceramic bridge that presented a thirty second walk to Space Opera Alpha’s airlock. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, Bonnie.”

Androgyne stepped onto the bridge and took her first few weightless steps. She gripped the gantry bars for dear life.

She took in the view of Saturn and her rings looming above her head, spinning very, very slowly. “Wow.”

“What’s up, Androgyne?” Katz asked.

“It’s amazient. It’s so big.”

“Try not to look up, keep focused,” Bonnie’s voice beamed around her head, “Admiring the view will only slow you down.”

Androgyne twisted her head to the left. Enceladus shone brightly, illuminating her visor. She felt a hum rattle through her outer skin, numbing her limbs.

Her feet lifted away from the bridge floor as she moved forward. She grabbed the railing and yanked herself toward the spaceship, her toes barely trailing along the surface.

“Another fifteen seconds, and I’ll be there.”

“Keep on the bridge. Don’t let go,” Katz advised. “That’s what the rails are for. Use them.”

Androgyne reached the edge of the bridge and pressed her palms against Alpha’s airlock door. She scanned the ridges for the plate that would open it.

“I’m here.”

“The plate should be shoulder-high to you on the right of Alpha’s

airlock," Bonnie said.

"Understood."

The plate was exactly where Bonnie said it would be. Androgyne fanned her fingers out and slapped her palm against the surface. "Opening now."

"Understood. You might want to take a step back so the bridge can connect."

She did as instructed.

Alpha's airlock door flew up, releasing a burst of pressurized air. The edge of the bridge snapped to the metal rim, locking into place.

"Get in," Katz said.

"Yes."

She yanked herself forward and floated into the airlock, looking down at the bridge completing its connection. The two space crafts were now joined together by the bridge.

"Releasing thrusters, now," Katz advised. "Confirm connection, please, Androgyne."

"Connection confirmed," She slammed a red button on the wall of the airlock with her fist. "Closing outer door now."

The room whirred, preparing to shut the door.

"Understood," Katz said.

The door slid down and closed off the exit as Androgyne looked around. An alarm sounded off, followed by a flashing red light.

"What's that?" she said, somewhat alarmed.

"It's just the airlock closing. Nothing to be scared about."

"Okay."

The door slid down its housing, locking her into place. "I think I'm decompressing."

"Yes, the inner airlock door will open in a few seconds."

Katz stood up from his flight deck console and angled his screen to the control deck.

Tor looked over at the screen and held his headset in place. "Visual?"

"Yep, this is what she's seeing," Katz pointed at his screen.

It offered a live feed from Androgyne's visor. The pair watched as she moved through the inner airlock door and into the ship.

"Androgyne, we have POV visual. We can see what you can see."

"Okay," her voice came through the screen. "It's dark. I can't see anything."

Katz folded his arms and watched the monitor. "Give Manuel a command."

"What should I tell him?"

"Maybe turn the lights on?"

The screen went pitch black as Androgyne stepped into the darkness and looked around. “On-board computer, Manuel. Do you read me?”

Nothing happened.

“Manuel?” Androgyne was close to giving up. “Nothing is happening.”

“The live feed is a bit patchy, can you see anything?” Katz asked and turned to Tor for a reaction. “The power must be down.”

Tor didn’t know how to respond. “It could have gone into stasis. Knock it out of sleep mode.”

“Androgyne,” Katz said. “Try the following command. A-W-A-K-E-4-5-7.”

“Affirmative. A-W-A-K-E-4-5-7.”

The moment she finished repeating the command, the lights flickered. The interior of Space Opera Alpha sprang to life.

It felt like she was breathing once again.

She was faced with a dusty, corridor leading to the control center. “Should I unmask, now?”

“Yes, take an atmosphere reading,” Katz bit his lip, hoping the exposure wouldn’t fry her circuits. “Report on oxygen levels, please.”

Androgyne closed her eyes and flicked a switch on her visor. The front panel lifted up.

She was convinced she’d suffocate. Once her lungs filled with oxygen her mind was put at rest.

“I can breathe.” She took out a thin black panel from her pocket. “Taking a reading now.”

Classical music played in the distance. A familiar tune to anyone who could hear it.

The panel beamed to life, spinning numbers around as she waved it around. The result appeared on the screen: 81mm Hg.

“Did you get the reading?”

“Yes, just patching it through now,” Katz looked at the number appear in the top-right of the screen. “Eighty-one milligrams? Seems perfectly reasonable. Botanix must still be in operation.”

“Manuel?” Androgyne asked. “Can anyone read me?”

“Still nothing?” Katz asked.

“No. I’m making my way to the control deck,” she said, walking toward the door.

Several clanging noises waded through the ship’s vibration as she made her way to the door. “Centrifuge is normal.”

“Understood. So it’s just Manuel we’re having issues with?”

“It seems so.”

Androgyne reached the door to the control desk and hit the

button on the wall.

It slid open, to reveal an exact replica of Space Opera Beta's deck.

A front panel with exactly the same ship controls – and an empty chair. To her left, the comms panel, and an empty chair. *Beethoven's 5th Symphony in C Minor* played from the communications panel.

"Can you hear the music?"

"Yes," Katz voice came through the headset.

"Captain? Can you see what I'm seeing?"

"Yes. How's the flight deck. Is it operational?"

"The controls are still on, but there's nobody here."

Back on Opera Beta, Manuel appeared beside Katz's face and flapped its pages. "Captain, may I suggest something?"

"Yes, Manuel?"

"Perhaps if I board the vessel, I can infiltrate the main unit and start investigating."

"Let's wait a moment and see what we find," Katz said, returning to the screen. "Androgyne? Can you read me?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Atmosphere levels confirmed, but no sign of life."

"That is correct."

Tor placed his hand on the screen. "Androgyne, this is Tor. Can you patch into Alpha's mainframe on the comms panel, please?"

Katz looked at him, quizzically. "What are you doing?"

"I want to know the status of communication. I think you'd want to know too, right?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Tor raced back to his comms panel, sat into his chair and began typing.

Androgyne did the same. "Okay, I'm here."

"Try this. I'm sending you the coordinates," Tor said, "If Alpha is operational, it should respond to the following code."

"Okay."

"USARIC, hyphen, S, O, A, hyphen, one, one, eight.."

"Understood." Androgyne typed the command into the comms deck. "Done."

"We're looking for captain Zillah Chin-Dunne," Tor said, "OSR. One, One Eight."

Androgyne typed O-S-R-1-1-8 onto the keyboard. "Okay, done—"

The mainframe beeped and sprung to life. The screen displayed a colossal amount of static, surprising Androgyne. "What's happening?"

"What are you doing?" Came a voice from behind her. She spun around on her chair and gulped back the urge to scream.

She froze solid and stared at the vision in front of her.

"Z-Zillah?"

"My God," Katz looked at the screen in bewilderment. "Tor, look at this."

"What?"

Tor joined Katz to observe the woman in Androgyne's POV feed. "Is that her?"

Katz interrupted him. "Androgyne?"

Zillah Chin-Dunne, the Japanese captain of Space Opera Alpha, stood a few feet away from Androgyne. Apart from her unhappy demeanor, she seemed to be a picture of health.

Zillah shut the music off, catching Androgyne's attention. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh, don't know what to say—"

"—I put you back in N-Vigorate for your own safety. How did you get out?"

Zillah made her way to the communications panel and shut it down. Androgyne couldn't help but stare at her, utterly confused.

"Androgyne," Katz whispered, "This is Zillah, the captain of Opera Alpha. Judging by the way she's talking, she thinks you're Alpha's Androgyne unit. Just play along with it."

"Honestly," Zillah flicked the levers off one-by-one on the communications unit, "What are you doing here? Why are you fiddling around with things that don't involve you?"

"She thinks I'm a droid?" Androgyne whispered a bit too loud.

"No, don't say—" Katz's voice cut off.

"Huh?" Zillah shot Androgyne a look of suspicion. "Who are you talking to?"

"Umm, no-one. Captain."

"Who woke you?" Zillah planted her hands on Androgyne's shoulders and inspected her face. "You can't wake yourself up, so someone must have done it. Who was it?"

"I, uh, do not know how to respond."

"Oh…" Zillah finally put two and two together. "You're not *my* Androgyne, are you?"

"Yes, I am," she said, afraid to reveal the truth."

"What lessence," Zillah pushed her away. "Manuel?"

The Alpha's Manuel appeared beside Zillah and hovered around her. "Yes, Captain?"

"Who is this impostor?"

The holographic book fluttered over to Androgyne and inspected her. "She's not one of ours, ma'am. She's from the ship that has just connected to us."

Zillah couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What ship?"

"I'm getting a reading that another ship has docked with us."

Androgyne held her breath, waiting for Zillah's response. Hopefully it would be one in which she didn't end up killing her.

"We've been rescued?" A smile crept along Zillah's face. "They responded. They got our message?"

"It seems so," Manuel said, floating back to his master.

"Oh, goodie!" Zillah danced a happy dance and clapped her hands together. "My God, I thought we were doomed."

"I, uh," Androgyne stepped out of the chair and ran an array of excuses through her mind. Something wasn't right. "I'm not sure—"

"—USARIC got our message and have come to save us!" Overjoyed, Zillah became very emotional. She held out her hand for Androgyne to shake. "Thank you so much for coming. Can I speak to your Captain, please?"

"Umm, yes. Okay," she said, "Captain Katz?"

"Yes?"

"Captain Chin-Dunne would like to speak to you."

A few moments later, Zillah patched her headset into Androgyne's frequency and led her guest into the hyper-sleep chamber.

"How has the crew been able to sustain themselves for the past *four* years?" Katz asked Zillah.

"When Opera Alpha arrived at Enceladus, she blacked-out entirely. All comms went down for approximately twenty minutes. When the backup drive started, I had to act accordingly and sent out a distress call."

Zillah pointed at the six hyper-sleep pods.

"Botanix took a hit. Fifty-eight percent damage," she said. "A lot of the plant life didn't survive and the main coolant stopped producing water. My only option was to conserve oxygen and food, and put the crew and myself in hyper-sleep."

Katz, much like Androgyne, felt that something was truly off.

"Are they being fed intravenously?" Katz asked.

"Yes, we have enough protein and supplements to last ten years," Zillah explained. "We genuinely didn't think we would see rescue."

"Are you thrusters damaged?" Katz asked.

"Yes. We were a sitting duck out there praying for rescue. It doesn't matter now, if we can board Beta and go home with you."

"We don't have enough hyper-sleep chambers to house everyone," Katz said. "I'd like to send my team in to investigate. It's possible we could return to Earth together, and have each crew member spend half the journey in sleep."

"Everyone would spend six months awake?"

“Yes, something like that,” Katz said and turned to Tor. “I don’t like this one bit. I want to know what happened to Alpha, and why it blacked out.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“Assemble our crew. We’re boarding Alpha,” Katz returned to the screen. “Zillah, can you confirm Alpha is ready to accommodate my team?”

“Yes, Captain,” Zillah said, “I can show you what you need to see when you board.”

“Thanks, I’ll leave our Androgyne with you. My team and I will board Alpha in thirty minutes. There will be five of us boarding, including our feline.”

Zillah entered Alpha’s control deck and looked at Androgyne, suspiciously. “USARIC sent a feline up with you?”

“Yes,” Katz said, “We’ve made a discovery which we can share with you. It could help to make some sense out of what’s been happening.”

“Oh—”

“—See you in thirty minutes. Katz, over and out.”

Androgyne sniffed around the air, feeling her sensors go off the charts. “I’m sensing an unusual odor in the air. What is it?”

Zillah crouched to her knees and held her head in her hands. “Ugghhh…”

“What are you doing?”

Zillah moved her hands away, to reveal a trickle of pink-colored blood coming from her right eye. “Androgyne, I have something to tell you. You’re not going to like it.”

“What are you going to tell me?”

“You’re not human,” Zillah wiped the blood away from her eye and licked it from her knuckle. “You’re an android. Do you know how I know this?”

“Why are you bleeding?” Androgyne went to touch Zillah’s face, only to have her hand patted away in defiance by the ship’s captain.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?”

“What?”

“You are not human. Do you know how I know?”

Androgyne’s face fell as she took in the revelation. “No, I do not. How do you know?”

Zillah grabbed the back of the communications chair and spun it around.

Alpha’s Androgyne, identical in every way to Beta’s, lay lifeless in the chair. The front of its face had been removed. The once-pulsating brain had dried up and developed a thin layer of skin over it.

“I don’t know what happened during the black out. It fried our communications and terminated our droid. I found her like this.”

Androgyne looked her peer in the face and paused. She traced her finger over the droid’s skull. It was as if she was looking in a mirror. “Is it me?”

“No, it’s not you,” Zillah said, backing up against the door. “Well, that’s not strictly true. It’s not you, but it is *one* of you.”

Androgyne looked up from the chair, confused. “One of me?”

“I’m sorry, Androgyne,” Zillah thumped the panel on the wall, opening the door to the control deck. She stepped through it, trying not to show any emotion. “Please forgive me.”

The door slid shut, sealing Androgyne in with the dead droid. “No, you can’t do this. Don’t leave me in here!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Captain Katz, Tripp, Bonnie, Jaycee, and Haloo strapped themselves into their outer-skins, ready to disembark Space Opera Beta.

Bonnie held Jelly in her arms made a fuss of her. “Hey, gorgeous. Are you ready for an adventure of a lifetime?”

“Bonnie, stop talking weird to the cat, please,” Katz said, yanking the zip up to his helmet. “Let’s try to keep first physical contact with Alpha as professional as possible.”

Bonnie smirked and bounced Jelly around in her arms. She affected a cutesy voice, indirectly talking to Katz through the animal. “What’s that, Jelly? Yes, he *is* being a miserable old so-and-so, isn’t he?”

Katz looked up in horror at Bonnie, much to everyone else’s amusement. “Dr. Whitaker.”

“Don’t pay attention to the nasty man,” Bonnie continued, “He’s just unhappy that he can’t smoke in space.”

Katz gave as good as he got. He stroked the top of Jelly’s head and gave as good as he was getting. “What’s that, Jelly? Yes, that’s right. Bonnie *is* a feisty one with a chip on her shoulder, isn’t she?”

Jelly didn’t know which way to look. Her innocent eyes suggested she couldn’t stop the stupid feud between her colleagues.

‘Meow.’

Tripp, Jaycee and Haloo burst out laughing.

“And yes, she has got a chip on her shoulder,” Katz finished in his silly voice, eying Bonnie, “And she might be disciplined for insubordination. That’s right.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Tripp folded down his visor. “You two can go get a room and turf it out once we’re done rescuing our friends.”

“Mmm, sounds like a challenge,” Bonnie licked her lips at Katz. “Wanna come back to my quarters and give me what for?”

“Not especially, no.”

Katz turned to Jaycee and was taken aback by just how tooled up he was. He clutched a K-SPARK machine gun in his arm and was decorated with grenades, flash bangs and tear gas.

Two Rez-9 mini-guns hung from his belt, along with what looked like a glowing machete in a holster next to his thigh. The cannons on both boots completed the look.

Katz finally opened his mouth. “Traveling light today, Jaycee?”

“Yeah, not much is worrying me on this one.”

“So I see.”

Katz flipped down his visor.

An array of digital messages zipped across his screen. The mouthpiece from his headset streak across his mouth. “Wool ar-Ban, Tor Klyce, this is Captain Daryl Katz. Can you read me?”

“Yes, captain,” Wool’s voice came through his visor.

“We are disembarking, now. Heading for Opera Alpha.”

“Understood.”

Tor and Wool stood in front of the communications deck at the front of the ship.

They watched the first airlock door open and allow the team inside. The door shut behind them and the lock decompressed.

“Captain, we have a bit of an issue with the comms link to Androgyne,” Tor flicked through some buttons on the deck.

“What is it?” Katz asked, turning to the outer door.

“We’ve lost communication. She must have hit a black spot.”

“Understood. We will establish contact once we reach Alpha.”

Jaycee turned to Jelly in Bonnie’s arms. “Why are we taking the cat on board?”

“She’s going to tell us what’s going on, hopefully.”

The outer airlock door slid open, revealing the bridge streaking across the infinite vacuum of space. Alpha loomed on the other end.

“Crossing now,” Katz said, leading the way. He grabbed the bridge railings and propelled himself forward. “Androgyne, Zillah? Can you read me?”

No response. Katz looked at the airlock door, hoping one of the two people on board Alpha would open it for them ahead of time. “I repeat, do you read us?”

“The patch is down, captain,” Tor’s voice came through the headset. “It should only be for a few minutes. If worse comes to the worse, just use your glove on the panel to get in. It shouldn’t be an issue. I’ll keep Beta outer lock door on standby in case anything untoward occurs.”

“Thanks, Tor,” Katz looked over his shoulder. Haloo, Tripp, Jaycee, and Bonnie followed behind. “Team, keep your wits about you when we board. Watch your six. Comms are going dark.”

Tripp gripped the bridge railing, fighting off the urge to marvel at Saturn. He needed to keep moving. “What’s happened?”

“They must have changed frequency. Tor thinks it might be a black spot.”

“Meow,” Jelly rolled around in Bonnie’s arms, wanting to be released.

“Ooh, no, Jelly. Not now, sweetie,” Bonnie said to her. “It’s not safe out here.”

Tripp reached Katz as he prepared to place his glove on the panel

beside the airlock. “I hope they’re both okay in there.”

Androgyne banged on the control deck door with her fist, screaming for help. “Let me out of here!”

Zillah had her trapped inside the control deck. She had Opera Alpha’s complete flight deck to herself. She knew she could send a distress call, but didn’t how how it worked. Fortunately, she knew Manuel could assist her.

“Manuel?” she called out, fearing for her life.

The book appeared in front of her, banging its front and back flaps together. “Good after-morning, Androgyne. How can I be of assistance?”

“Get me out of here,” she heaved and tried to regulate her breathing.

“No, I don’t think so,” Manuel floated back and double-over itself. “You see, Miss Zillah has locked you in here for a reason.”

“What reason?”

“Something happened to our ship. I don’t know what happened, but the result was that everyone died.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

Manuel vaporized into a thousand pieces of holographic molecules, rendering himself gone. “I have cut off all channels of communication to your crew. You are to remain here until they board.”

“No, no,” Androgyne panicked and held her mouthpiece steady, determined to make contact with her crew. “Captain Katz, do you read me? Do *not* board Alpha. I repeat, do *not* board Alpha. Something is wrong.”

The outer airlock door slid up, offering Katz, Tripp, Jaycee, Haloo, Bonnie, and Jelly into the airlock. They hadn’t received Androgyne’s message.

“Airlock closing,” Tripp yanked the lever, shutting the five of them inside. “Commence decompression.”

The red bulb inside the airlock spun around, signaling the decompression taking place.

Jaycee lifted his K-SPARK auto firearm and peered through the inner airlock door. He saw someone stare back at them.

“There’s someone there. I think it’s Captain Chin-Dunne.”

“Step aside, Jaycee,” Katz said, turning to Jaycee. “Let me do the introductions and pleasantries. When we’re in I want you and Tripp to establish surviving crew and escort them onto Beta. Take them to Medix and run a full health diagnostic.”

“Yes, captain.”

“Haloo?” Katz turned to her.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Keep it simple. I want a full report on Botanix. Zillah said something about distress. Let’s see how much we can salvage.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Bonnie,” Katz turned to her and looked at Jelly. “You and I will update Zillah and introduce her to Anderson.”

“Okay.”

The inner airlock door opened. The silhouettes of the five Beta crew members bled across the ground, reaching the titanium shoes of their host.

Zillah Chin-Dunne.

It was as if nothing had happened. She seemed very happy to see them. Katz felt it strange that Androgyne wasn’t with her.

Katz stepped forward, ushering his crew toward their new friend.

“My name is Captain Daryl Katz of USARIC’s Space Opera Beta. This is my crew.”

“I’m so happy to see you,” Zillah said, shaking hands with Katz. Her grip was vice-like, which surprised him. “We’re all so glad you came for us.”

“That concerns us, Zillah,” Katz said, looking around the airlock exterior. No significant damage had been done. “We didn’t receive a distress call.”

“You didn’t?”

“No,” Katz walked forward with the others. They poked around the immediate area, scanning for any signs of life or damage. “Our mission is to Enceladus. We are to decipher Saturn Cry, and we think we may have the answer.”

“Meow,” Jelly spotted Zillah and growled.

Zillah backed away and covered her chest with both arms. “You brought a feline up here?”

“Yes,” Bonnie said, “We made a discovery. The cat is responding to Saturn Cry—”

“—Get that… *thing*… off my ship.”

Jelly growled and launched out of Bonnie’s arms. She tried to grab the creature, but failed to respond in time.

Jelly’s feet hit the floor. She trundled toward Zillah, bushy-tailed, snarling and growling.

“I d-don’t like c-cats,” Zillah said, “I’m, uh, allergic.”

“It’s okay,” Katz giggled, “She won’t bite.”

Jelly sat on her hind legs straight and looked up at Zillah. “Meow.”

“What in God’s name is USARIC doing? Bringing a cat into

space?"

Tripp approached Zillah and nodded toward the front of the ship. "We'd like to run a few diagnostic tests if possible. Get your crew out of hyper-sleep and have them embark Beta so we can get you all to safety."

"Yes, of course," Zillah said, "Perhaps we could start with a briefing in our crew hub?"

"Okay."

* * *

Back on Opera Beta, Tor paced around the control deck, muttering. Wool found his behavior strange.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm figuring something out, wait a second," he said, deep in contemplation. "Something isn't right."

"Why, what's the problem?"

"Communications are still down. We've lost Androgyne. I think the autopilot might be interfering," Tor looked up and snapped his fingers. "Manuel?"

The holographic book appeared in the middle of the room. "Hello, Tor. How can I assist you?"

"I'm sorry to have to do this to you, but while Katz and the team are on Alpha, I need to know you're not causing interference."

"I understand."

"Power-down Manuel two-point-two," Tor said, watching Manuel slowly fade away. "Reconcile manual control."

The control deck lit up, indicating that Tor was now in charge of Space Opera Beta.

"What are you doing?"

Tor made his way over to Wool. "Remember what happened to Baldron a few hours ago?"

"Yes. Traitor."

"I'm afraid he wasn't alone."

He gripped the lever on the deck and yanked it back.

The bridge connecting the two ships began to roll back, separating the two vessels.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Tor said, "I'm severing the bridge."

"What?" Wool jumped to her feet and thought about preventing Tor from pulling the bridge back. "Why?"

"We have the message decoded and everyone's on the other ship,

just as planned. We have everything we need, now."

"What? *We*?"

"Yes."

Tor punched Wool in the face, instantly knocking her out. She spun around and landed in his arms.

"Shh. Good girl," he said, his accent changing from American to Russian instantly, "Let's get you chained up where you belong."

N-Carcerate

Space Opera Beta

Tor dragged the unconscious Wool by her arms across the metal gantry. Baldron stood up from his prison bay and watched as his comrade lay her flat across the floor.

"You took your time," Baldron said in a Russian accent, thumping on the thick glass. "I'm fed up with having to do that stupid Yank accent. Get me out of here."

"Okay, yes. In a moment."

"Did they board the Alpha?"

"All except this one, here. I took care of her."

Tor hopped over to Baldron's cell door and placed his glove against the transparent panel. "Come on, get out."

The door slid open. "Cell four. Open," announced a female voice.

"Comrade," Baldron opened his arms and hugged Tor.

"We have what we need. Or, rather, we have what we *don't* need."

"Did you shut Manuel down?"

"Yes," Tor said, looking Baldron up and down. "But your reckless antics nearly cost us the mission."

"It is not my fault he switched cups. I am fortunate that I did not sip from it."

"That stupid cat ruined everything," Tor said, running over to Wool's feet. "Here, assist me with this stupid American woman."

"My pleasure."

Baldrom slid his hands under Wool's armpits. Tor took her ankles. They lifted her up and threw her into cell four.

"My word, she's heavier than she looks."

"Must be all those cheeseburgers they eat. Oh, who cares?" Tor smacked his palm against the plate. "Goodnight, princess."

As the door slid to a close, the red light came to life above the frame. Wool was now a prisoner on her own ship.

"What now?" Baldron asked. "Is everyone else on board Alpha?"

“Imbecile. I told you already that they are,” Tor walked off, with Baldron following, “We send a message back to Dimitri Volkov that we have deciphered Saturn Cry. We tell them, also, that the crew of Space Opera Beta are dead when they tried to rescue Alpha.”

“Very good,” Baldron said, making quotation marks with his forefingers. “*Tor Klyce*. Where did you come up with such a stupid pseudonym?”

“Oh! You are one to speak, *Baldron Landaker*. I could ask you the same question. Where did you come up with such a stupid name?”

Tor made his way out of N-Carcerate and adjusted his headset. “We keep using our aliases for the time being. I will send a message to Dimitri and inform them of the bad news, and that we are charting a course back to Earth.”

“What do I do?”

“I do not know,” Tor looked at Baldron and sighed. “Make yourself useful and go into hyper-sleep?”

* * *

Zillah walked the crew of Opera Beta into Alpha’s conference hub. “I have a couple of things to tell you. It’s not much, but it’s all that we know.”

Tripp, Katz, Bonnie, and Haloo took a seat around the table. Jaycee found it difficult to sit into the chair, given the sheer bulk of his armor. Zillah sniggered and watched him try to get comfortable.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Jaycee said, “Carrying quite a load, here.”

“So I see.”

Zillah turned to the rest of the crew. She circled her own face with her finger. “You may remove your visors, incidentally. It’s perfectly breathable here.”

Katz and his team looked at each other. One by one, they carefully removed their visors and took a deep breath.

“That’s right, every one. Get a good, *deep* lungful.”

And so, they did. Every one’s chest inflated and deflated, thoroughly absorbing the air.

Zillah rubbed her hands and called up a holographic image of Opera Alpha from the central conference deck.

“As you can see, Alpha took a considerable amount of damage. The centrifuge stopped rotating, causing a lift in gravity. Once the backup drives took effect, most of Alpha’s operations returned to normal.”

“So you were hit by something?” Tripp asked. “Debris?

Meteorites?"

Zillah shook her head. "No, the power-down occurred quite out of the blue."

She waved the image of the ship away and pulled up a live feed of the moon Enceladus. "We were six hours away from Enceladus when it happened. Manuel picked up this image. Can you see it?"

Everyone leaned in to look at the dark side of Enceladus.

"No?" Katz said.

"Here," Zillah enlarged the picture. "Something fantastic happened. We discovered something on the dark side of Enceladus. A pink gas cloud funneling from its core. Typical attributes of a wormhole. As it turns out, the source of Saturn Cry."

Tripp shook his head. "What *is* that pink thing?"

Bonnie released Jelly onto the conference table. She stretched her legs and trundled over to the holographic feed of Enceladus. "Meow."

Jelly clawed at it, but her paws sank through the image, confusing her.

"Jelly, behave," Bonnie patted the table in an attempt to get the cat to return to her.

Zillah didn't like the feline's presence on the table.

"So, what you're saying is that Enceladus is a portal?"

"It contains a wormhole on the dark side. To where, we don't know."

Haloo scanned the hub and realized someone was missing. "Zillah, where is Androgyne?"

"She's in the control deck."

Trapped inside Alpha's control deck, Androgyne freaked out next to her counterpart lying dead across the chair.

Saturn hung in the star-filled sky, seemingly looking down on her. A giant, beautiful blue star that blocked any kind of meaningful progress.

She held her finger to her ear in the hope someone could come to her aid. "Hello? Does anybody read me?"

No response.

"Hello? This is Tor Klyce in Opera Beta. Is that you Androgyne?"

"Oh God, yes. Tor, it's me," she said with relief, "Listen, I am stuck. Zillah has trapped me on Alpha. I can't get out. My lungs are tightening up, it's as if the room is running out of air…"

"Oh, that's a shame, isn't it?" Tor responded with little emotion.

"Yes, it is. Please, help me."

"No, I don't think so."

"What?" Androgyne ran around in circles, trying to compute Tor's words. She felt her limbs slow down and get heavier. "Why won't you

help me?"

"Because I want you to die with the others."

She reached the corner of the control deck and reached a ten-foot-high compartment. Desperate to find a tool that might rescue her, she yanked on the door.

It flung outward, releasing Zillah's dead, deflated body.

"Agh." Androgyne stepped out of the corpse's fall toward the ground. "She's dead. She's dead."

"Who's dead?" Tor asked.

"Zillah. She has some sort of pink blood on her face. Oh my God, she's dead…"

"Androgyne?" Tor interrupted. "Listen to me very carefully."

"Yes, yes?"

She took a step back in complete confusion. Looking around for a way out proved to be futile in the extreme.

"It's very simple Androgyne. You and the Beta crew are going to die."

"What?"

"Goodbye, Androgyne."

The communication cut off, leaving Androgyne with two corpses in the control deck and very little else.

She just about managed to stagger to the free chair next to her counterpart's body. She sat into it, coughing and spluttering, looking down at her knees.

A drop of pink blood splashed against her thigh.

Her eyes were bleeding.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Botanix

Space Opera Alpha

Zillah walked the crew of Opera Beta into the partially-destroyed botanical area of her ship.

The plants had withered. Most had disintegrated into a black husk. The remaining plant life had turned a sickly-looking pink color.

"As you can see, Botanix took a lot of the damage."

"The oh-two levels won't have helped if there was an explosion," Haloo said, taking out a device from her pocket. It sprang to life and took a meter reading. "Do you remember an explosion?"

Zillah shook her head and watched Jelly growl as she prowled her way through the plants. "No, no explosion. Not that we can recall."

"So you're saying everything just went dark?" Bonnie asked, looking over at the water coolant.

"Yes, utter darkness," Zillah paused to close her eyes and take in a lungful of air. "Mmm. Even with the majority of the systems down, every so often, I come back here and enjoy the clean air. It reminds me of Earth."

"Really?" Haloo took a reading from the room.

"I've been up here for so long. It's gets lonely."

"I'm sure," Katz said. "I think we've seen enough. Tripp?"

"Captain," he walked over to him and pulled him aside. "Can I have a quick word?"

"Certainly."

Tripp walked with Katz to the corner of the Botanix chamber and kept his voice low. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably," Katz kept a stern eye on Zillah inhaling the clean air. "Zillah is not in proper operating order."

"I don't like this *at all*," Tripp whispered, "Something has happened here. None of it makes any sense."

"Power down for twenty minutes? No-one remembers anything?" Katz agreed, "Something's gone spectacularly wrong."

"Want to know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think they went through whatever that thing is on Enceladus."

"The wormhole?"

“Yes,” Tripp was in danger of being overheard. “I think we should wake everyone up and put them in quarantine.”

Tripp caught Katz looking at him strangely. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Your eye. It’s bleeding.”

“Huh?”

Tripp ran his finger across his cheek. A blob of dark pink liquid appeared on his glove. He blinked hard in an attempt to squash whatever remained of the substance from his tear duct. “Is it gone now?”

“No,” Katz cleared his throat and stormed over to Zillah. “I think we’ve seen enough. Can I have everybody’s attention, please?”

Haloo, Jaycee, Bonnie, and Jelly turned to Katz, awaiting instructions.

“With Zillah’s approval, we’ll reconvene with Androgyne and awake her crew from hyper-sleep. It is our opinion that Alpha is not salvageable, so we’ll have to leave her where she is.”

Zillah wasn’t too happy to hear the news. Instead of responding inappropriately, she crouched to her knees and offered her arms to Jelly. “Come here, girl.”

“Meow.”

Jelly ran along the plants and jumped into her arms. She held out her infinity claws for Zillah to make a fuss over.

“Captain Katz,” Zillah said, hugging Jelly in her arms. “I’m afraid you do not have my blessing. You see, Space Opera Alpha is my ship. I’m afraid I cannot let her wither away to nothing a billion miles away from Earth.”

“I’m afraid that is an assertion for you to make. Captain.”

Zillah rubbed noses with Jelly. The cat pawed at her cheeks and widened her eyes. Her pupils went from dark orange to yellow in a few seconds. “Follow me, everyone.”

“Where?” Tripp asked.

“Good girl,” Zillah walked out of Botanix with Jelly in her arms. “Perhaps I will oblige Captain Katz after all.”

Tripp and Katz watched her walk through the door. They were somewhat hesitant to follow her.

“That’s one weird chick.”

The hyper-sleep chamber on Space Opera Alpha was an exact replica of Opera Beta’s. Seven pods in total. Only one of them was open – Zillah’s.

She stood with Jelly in her arms and stroked her head. “Look, Jelly. All my crew are fast asleep.”

Bonnie and Jaycee followed her in. Haloo, Katz, and Tripp walked

in after them.

"Good, good. Let's get them up and ready, Zillah," Katz said.

She turned around one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees to face Katz and his crew. She lifted Jelly to her face and listened to her purr.

"I cannot do that, Captain Katz."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because," Zillah closed her eyes, "They're all dead."

One by one, the fronts of each pod clanged open, revealing a gray, rotten corpse.

Jaycee squeezed his machine gun in his hands, surveying the array of dead bodies. His trigger finger itched up a storm. "My God…"

Zillah rubbed her face against Jelly's belly.

Bonnie held back the others and stepped forward. "Zillah?"

"Mmm," she moaned, clutching Jelly's body. "You came here looking for answers, didn't you?"

"Zillah?" Bonnie said, carefully. "Give me Jelly."

"Meow," Jelly stretched her paws out and fanned out her claws. The metal connected with Zillah's face and tore at her lips.

"Let me show you something incredible." Zillah lifted her head and opened her mouth.

Her top lip crept up along her gums and folded up over her nose. Her bottom lip slung down over her bottom row of teeth and slid under her chin.

The crew watched, aghast, as Zillah's body lifted five inches into the air.

And then, a familiar "cry' emitted from her chest and out through her mouth.

Hisss… followed by an electrical guitar sound.

And then, twelve seconds in… a familiar *whump*. Jelly shrieked and launched out of Zillah's arms.

"M-My God…" Tripp said, watching the bizarre, demonic light show.

"Yes, I am," Zillah's voice crept in along the hiss, a bizarre fusion of static and growl, "Pink… Symphony…"

Twenty seconds into the hiss. Another *whump* barreled through the hyper-sleep chamber.

Zillah's skin slurped from her head and melted down her suit.

"She's already dead?" Tripp gasped. "Look at her!"

"She's being used as a transmitter," Bonnie stepped back and scooped the petrified cat from the floor. "We gotta get out of here."

"You… cannot… leave…" Zillah's body convulsed and flipped inside out, blasting fragments of her skin suit in all directions. "Pink Symphony."

"Everyone out," Katz turned around and made for the door.

“Now.”

Zillah’s body jigsawed in-and-out and expanded with the chamber, bursting the screen doors of the each sleeping vessel. “Gaahhh!”

“Get out of here, now!” Bonnie chased along with the others toward the airlock.

“Tor,” Katz pressed his finger to his ear, “Tor, this is Katz, do you read me?”

“Yes, Captain. This is Tor, you’re coming through loud and clear.”

“We’re coming back. Zillah and Alpha team are deceased. We are in severe danger.”

“Ah. That’s a negative, good buddy,” Tor threatened over the connection. “Sorry to report that the bridge has been retracted and you’re on your own. Over.”

Katz looked confused. The reality of their predicament sunk in. He had to make sure he’d heard his comms officer correctly. “What? Sorry, Tor, can you repeat?”

“Did he just say what I think he said?” Bonnie asked, angrily, as they reached the inner airlock door.

The connection died off. Tor was no longer available.

“My God, My God,” Haloo began to freak out, “We’re going to die. We’re all going to die.”

“No, Haloo,” Tripp said, taking her shoulders and staring her in the face. “It’s okay, there’s been a miscommunication. Breathe.”

“I am b-breathing,” Haloo spluttered, a clump of snot pushed through her right nostril. She wiped her face and looked up at Tripp. “Please, d-don’t let us die.”

The interior of the ship rumbled louder and louder.

“I d-don’t know what’s g-going on, b-but I want to go home.”

“I know, I—” Tripp tried to calm her down but, instead, noticed a thick, pink teardrop rolling down her cheek. “Haloo?”

“Wh-what?”

“Your eye is bleeding.”

Katz triggered his headset over and over, but got no reply. “No, it’s no good. We’re cut off.”

“What about Androgyne?” Jaycee asked, keeping an eye out for Zillah. “We can’t leave her here.”

“We have no choice,” Katz said, “She’s replaceable. Us humans aren’t. Let’s get back to Opera Beta and get away from whatever this thing is.”

Katz snapped on his glove and slammed his palm against the panel airlock. He expected it to open.

It didn’t.

“C’mon, open up,” Katz patted the panel over and over again with

his glove. “It’s not opening.”

Androgyne sat next to her dead counterpart and felt a trickle of something race down her synthetic cheek.

It wasn’t blood, though. Instead, it was transparent and clear, like a bead of sweat.

She’d gotten over the worst of her turmoil, resigning herself the fact she’d never be rescued. She didn’t know where the Beta crew were. All she knew was that she was a captive aboard the Opera Alpha, and in serious peril.

She hit the intercom switch on the communication deck in a desperate bid to contact Alpha Beta.

“This is Androgyne, does anyone read me?”

To her surprise, the static kicked up and produced a familiar voice.

“This is Space Opera Beta, communications officer Tor Klyce.”

Androgyne felt a new emotion race through her body. She gasped for dear life and threw her body forward in haste.

“Tor, this is Androgyne. I am trapped on Opera Alpha. Something weird is happening.”

“Yes, I know you are trapped, Androgyne. How are you?”

“I’m scared and I can’t get out. Please help me. Where are the others?

“They’re on board Alpha with you.”

“Oh, thank God,” she started crying floods of tears and watch them flood onto her glove. “There’s water coming out of my eyes.”

“Yes, it’s called crying,” Tor’s voice seemed reassuring. “You’re scared, it’s perfectly natural.”

“I can’t get through to them. Can you advise them that I am trapped? It’s Zillah, she’s not a good person. She put me here.”

“You don’t remember the conversation we had ten minutes ago, do you?” Tor asked, “Unfortunately I am unable to help you, Androgyne.”

“What? Why? Can you not establish contact with them?”

“No,” he said, calmly, “It’s because I don’t want to.”

“What?” Androgyne couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “What do you mean you don’t want to?”

“Because I want you and the Beta crew to perish with Zillah. And you’re going to assist me.”

The reality of her situation finally hit home. The communication device slipped through her fingers.

“Androgyne, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” she muttered, knowing she was about to die.

“On your forearm is a synthetic panel,” he said, “Do you see it?”

She looked at her left forearm and closed her eyes.

"Yes, I see it."

"Good. Unclip the housing and lift the cover up."

She did as instructed. Two red buttons appeared next to a digital readout. "I've done it."

"Can you see two red buttons?"

"Yes," she sniffed and cleared her throat.

"You're equipped with a self-destruct button. Inside where your womb would be, if you were human, is a quarter tonne of C4. You will press the two buttons together with your free hand and keep it held down for five seconds, enabling a two-minute self-destruct scenario."

"No, no," she shook her head and tried to fight off her superior's instruction. "No, I won't."

"Yes, you will. Don't disobey a direct order. It's for your own good. You want to destroy Zillah, don't you?"

"Yes, but everyone else will die, too."

"Ugh," Tor went silent for a few moments. Androgyne heard him scream at the top of his lungs. "God damn it, you *will* do as I say."

"No," Androgyne bit her lip and went to close the housing back to her forearm. "I will not murder my crew—"

"—You're not human. You do know that, don't you?" Tor's voice shot through her earpiece, piercing her brain. "You're just a worthless, antiquated piece of metal."

She moved her fingers away from the housing and extended her forefinger and middle finger. "No, I'm n-not."

"You're the second-least intelligent life aboard the Alpha, behind that stupid cat."

She nodded and blurted. Tor's psychology was working wonders with her. "Repeat after me, Androgyne."

"Repeat after me, Androgyne," she recited, succumbing to Tor's command.

"I am worthless…"

"I… am… worthless…"

"—Good," Tor's voice perked up, "And I will sacrifice myself because it's the noblest thing to do."

"… and I will sacrifice myself, b-because it's the noblest thing to do."

"Do it. Hold down the two buttons."

She pressed the buttons down and kept them held. "Please, forgive me for what I'm about to do."

"I never told you to say that," Tor barked through her ear piece. "Just do as you're told, you useless piece of scrap metal."

Beep-beep.

"Self-destruct activated," announced the mechanism on her arm.

“Two minutes until detonation.”

Androgyne rose out of her chair, looking very sorry for herself.

“Well done, girl. You’ve just saved us from the bad guys. Now, go and sprawl over the flight deck. Maximize your damage to the Alpha’s mainframe, my beautiful walking and talking time bomb.

Androgyne looked at the central control deck and walked over to it. She stopped a couple of footsteps away and looked at the flashing lights and levers.

Tor continued to speak into her ear. “Cover the control deck with your body.”

Her forearm beeped quicker and quicker. She obliged her tormentor, held out her hands and took one last look at Saturn.

“Close your eyes,” Tor whispered.

The planet faded from sight as she closed her eyes. She topple forward and fell, chest-first, arms outstretched, across the flight deck.

“Nighty-night, princess.”

Back at Alpha’s airlock, Jaycee pushed Katz out of the way and lifted his K-SPARK at the lock. “Move.”

“What are you doing?”

“If we can’t open it manually, we’re gonna have to try some tough love.”

“Wait!” Tripp grabbed the barrel of the machine gun and pushed it away. “You are *not* going to blast the airlock open, are you?”

Jaycee stomped his foot, shaking the ground beneath. “Got any better ideas?”

“If you shoot the lock, you’ll kill us.”

“And if we stay, we’re dead, anyway,” Jaycee pushed Tripp to one side. He took three steps back and cocked the gun, aiming it at the panel. “You wanna put this to the vote?”

“No.”

“Good, because this isn’t up for debate,” Jaycee looked at Katz. “Permission to blow the inner airlock, captain?”

Katz turned to the corridor that led to the airlock. “Yes, yes,” he said, fearing an attack from Zillah – or something – was impending. “Do it. Everyone, visors down. We hit the bridge.”

Tripp, Haloo, Bonnie, and Jelly stepped aside and allowed Jaycee to blow the inner airlock. Jelly squinted at the firearm in Jaycee’s arms, focusing on what she thought was his *claw* clutching the trigger.

Tripp flipped his visor down and scanned the cuticle. “Tor, this is Tripp, come in?”

No response.

“Okay, blow the airlock,” Tripp said.

Jaycee flipped the lever down on the side of his machine gun. The

mechanism whirred to life, heating in his hand. He took aim at the panel.

"Here we go."

He blasted the panel, obliterating the inner door. The impact set off the ship's alarm.

"Warning, warning," announced the female operations voice, "Intruder alert. Airlock one-oh-niner damaged.

Jaycee stormed into the airlock, kicking the rest of the broken door apart with his giant titanium boot.

"Everyone get in," he said, grabbing the outer airlock door lever. "Listen, once this door is open, all hell is gonna break loose. Watch out for debris. Everything inside this ship is going to puke out into space, and we're standing right in the middle of its throat."

Katz pushed Jaycee to the side, dumbfounded by the view offered by the glass panel in the door. "My God…"

"What?" Tripp asked Katz, "What's wrong?"

Katz blinked and saw that the bridge was missing. The outer door on Beta's airlock was open, a mere fifty meters away.

"The bridge," Katz said, "It's gone."

Haloo freaked out and hyperventilated. The inside of her visor fogged up as she grabbed at the handle bar within the airlock. "No, no…"

Bonnie kept her grip on Jelly. "Haloo, get up."

"I c-can't breathe," Haloo gasped. A blast of pink blood splattered up inside her visor, "H-Help m-me…"

Jaycee hoisted her up to her feet by her arm. She fell into his arms.

"Katz, we need to go—"

A colossal explosion rumbled the airlock.

"What was that?" Katz asked.

The entire ship rumbled violently, shaking everyone around.

"No time to wait around to find out," Tripp grabbed the manual handle on the outer airlock door. "Sounded like an explosion."

Bonnie nodded at the door and held Jelly out. "Open it. We'll have to jump."

Tripp took a final glance at Katz and grabbed the handle. "Ready?"

"Do it."

Alpha's alarms sounded off. The spinning red bulbs rotated around and around. "Explosion on Alpha control deck."

"Androgyne?" Katz muttered. "On the control deck?"

"Opening now, everyone. Get ready," Tripp yanked the outer airlock door open. "Hold on!"

Everyone grabbed hold of the bars within the airlock.

An intense vacuum sucked anything that wasn't bolted to the ground through the crack in the door as it opened.

Jelly shrieked and extended her metal claws. "Meaa….oowwarrr…"

Boom. The airlock door fully opened, lifting everyone off their feet.

Various objects whizzed past the crew and shot out into the depths of space.

"Bonnie. Release Jelly first," Tripp said, hanging onto the door. "Throw her to Beta."

"Okay," Bonnie pushed her hands forward and launched the cat toward Beta's airlock door.

The cat screamed and held out her arms, pushing through the infinite vacuum, headed for Beta's airlock.

"Meaaooo—" she gulped down, feeling her chest begin to expand. Tufts of fur flew away from her face and littered the inside of her visor.

She clenched her claws and grabbed onto the inner airlock door, having successfully completed the journey.

"Bonnie, go!" Tripp said, keeping the door held open. She took a run toward the lip of airlock and jumped into the vacuum.

Whoosh.

Bonnie held her arms to her sides, darting through space like an arrow.

Beta's airlock, containing the frightened Jelly, whizzed closer and closer. Bonnie held out her arms and kicked herself in, grabbed a hold of a lock on the floor. "I'm in, go! Go!"

"Haloo," Tripp said through his visor, "You're next."

"I can't see," she growled, fighting off the vacuum pressure. She pinched the bottom of her visor, threatening to open it.

"What are you doing?" Tripp said, "Don't open your visor—"

It flipped up over her face, exposing her to the vacuum. Tripp couldn't believe what he saw.

Pink blood drenched Haloo's face. Her eyeballs protruded from her skull.

"I'm blind," she said, softly, as if overcome with wonder. "But I can see *everything*."

"What are you talking about?" Katz screamed, keeping hold of the bar on the wall. His feet kicked to the side. "Jump. Get back to Beta."

Having seen Bonnie carry out the same action moments ago, Haloo ran toward the outer door and launched herself forward.

Her body twisted over three-hundred-and-sixty degrees like a corkscrew.

Tripp, Jaycee and Katz heard her wail a cry of death as beads of blood revolved out from her visor, glinting in the light reflection from Saturn.

She made it into Beta's airlock, very worse for wear. Bonnie clung to the handlebar in the airlock and looked at Haloo gasping for air, coughing up blood. "Haloo? What are you doing?"

"Caaa-aaan't b-breathe…"

"Meaaoww," Jelly yelped from the airlock door, scratching at the glass panel. "Maaaahh…"

"Keep the air out of your lungs, Haloo," Bonnie screamed, "Don't breathe."

Katz turned to Tripp and Jaycee. "Okay, you two go—"

A loud rumbling followed the debris funneling out of the ship. A huge ball of fire rumbled toward them.

Zillah's apparition floated in front of the ball of fire, ten seconds away from impact.

"Pink symphony," Zillah's mouthed opened nearly as wide as her arms, "Come to me."

"Go," Katz shouted and turned to Tripp and Jaycee. "Go, now. I'll keep the door open."

"But, Captain," Tripp said as Katz barged him out of the way and grabbed the handle on the door.

"Don't disobey me. Both of you go, now."

Tripp nodded and stepped out of her airlock, twisting on his axis in the space. Jayce ran forward and jumped, holding Tripp around his waist.

"Hold on tight, Tripp."

Jaycee kicked them away from the airlock door and stretched out his legs. He aimed the tip of his foot toward the Zillah as she approached Katz at the airlock door.

"Let's kill two birds with one shoe."

BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!

Jaycee fire the cannon on his foot at Zillah as she entered the airlock. The force of the bullets pushed Jaycee back towards Beta as he held onto Tripp.

The bullets flew through Zillah's body and into the oncoming rush of fire barreling up the airlock.

"Daryl!" Tripp said.

Katz released the door. It slid across, blocking his final view of Tripp and Jaycee.

"Look after my crew, Tripp," Katz's final communication came through the headset.

"No!"

The door slammed shut, sealing Katz in with Zillah and the forthcoming explosion.

Tripp and Jaycee tumbled into Beta's airlock, along with Haloo, Bonnie and Jelly.

Tripp palmed the button on the outer door. It slammed shut sealing them off in the airlock.

Everyone turned to the glass door.

Space Opera Alpha vibrated. The airlock filled with fire, sending a magnificently aggressive wave through its structure.

The outer panels broke off, forcing the exterior of the ship to inflate along the ripples.

A brief period of silence, followed by a whooshing noise.

And then… everything went white.

Haloo, Bonnie, Jelly, Tripp and Jaycee held their forearms over their face and closed their eyes.

A brilliant white light grew from the center of Space Opera Alpha, flooding the interior Beta airlock.

Everything fell utterly silent.

Then, an almighty explosion woke up God himself. The ship exploded in sections.

First to go was the front of the cone.

Followed by its centrifuge, the ring itself shattered out, propelling the back-end of the ship away. It detonated impressively, adding to the already-spectacular firework show.

The pieces of the explosion briefly arranged themselves into the shape of Zillah's face, although Tripp knew it could have been his mind playing tricks.

The force of the explosion was enough to throw Opera Beta off track. Saturn bleached into view. What little remained of the dormant carcass of Space Opera Alpha hung in the vacuum of space.

All of this, and with no sound whatsoever. The explosion sucked back in on itself the moment it ejected.

No air in space. A deafening silence.

The only way the team knew the destruction of Space Opera Alpha was a reality was through the vibrations felt from the components of their craft they clung to.

Haloo coughed up some thick, pink blood, indicating at least that she was still alive and breathing.

Jelly slid down the airlock wall, utterly petrified.

"Is everyone okay?" Tripp asked, wiping his outer skin down.

Sure, everyone was essentially fine, if a little rattled.

Jaycee was without his firearm, lost in transit. The K-SPARK gun

spun around somewhere between what remained of Alpha and the steady Beta.

"Lost my gun, but we're good."

"Bonnie?" Tripp asked, approaching her and holding the side of her visor. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes," she said, looking into his eyes. "I'm okay."

Haloo climbed to her knees and pressed her gloved palms to the floor, spitting a few lumps of bloodied phlegm to the floor. She looked up at Tripp with her bleeding eyes.

Her face had turned pink.

"Tripp?"

"Haloo, are you okay?" He darted over to her and tried to lift her to her feet. She didn't have the energy to do it.

"I c-can't move," Haloo wiped her bloodied eye. "I don't know what's happened to me."

Jelly sauntered over to Haloo and investigated her legs. "Meaaaoooowww…" Jelly's cries seemed a bit deeper.

Tripp addressed Jaycee and Bonnie as he opened the inner airlock door. "We need to find Tor and take him out."

"Tripp?" Jaycee reached into his boot and took out a Rez-9 firearm. "Wool is on board with him."

"And Baldron is in N-Carcerate," Bonnie said, waiting for Tripp to open the door. "We need to know where he is."

"Yes." Tripp opened his visor and grabbed at his mouthpiece. "Manuel, this is Tripp. Can you read me?"

"Good after-afternoon, Tripp," Manuel's scrambled voice was full of static and sounded *dislodged*. "Did you r-r-r-rescue Aaaa-lphaa-aaaa __"

"Eh?" Tripp tried again. "Manuel? Do you read me?"

No response.

"Tor's interfering with him," Tripp said, "Jaycee, escort Haloo and Jelly to Medix. Find Wool, and have her run a health check on both of them."

"Yes, *Captain*."

Tripp nodded. "That's right. Have her run a check on you, too."

"Understood."

"Bonnie and I will find Tor and deal with him ourselves."

"You'd better take this, then," Jaycee unclipped a second Rez-9 firearm from his belt and handed it to Tripp.

Bonnie watched Tripp take it and slip it into his belt. "Be careful with that, Healy."

"I'm hoping I won't have to use it."

Bonnie punched the airlock wall, opening the door. "If I find him first, you won't have to."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jaycee helped Haloo across the hub. Jelly followed behind, meowing and whining.

Haloo's body threatening to buckle as she walked. The only thing keeping her moving was Jaycee's grip on her shoulder.

"You'll be okay, Haloo," Jaycee said as they made their way to the Medix center, "We'll get you seen to."

"Maaaah!" Jelly hopped in front of them and up the corridor. She ran her head along the side of the door to Medix.

"What is it, Anderson?" Jaycee said.

She scratched her metal claws up the window and rammed her head onto its surface.

"Yes, I know, I know," Jaycee clunked his way along the ground. "We'll find Wool and make sure everyone is okay."

Jaycee opened the door and walked into Medix with Haloo's arm draped over his shoulder.

Nobody was around.

"Wool, we're here," Jayce said. "Where are you?"

He removed Haloo's helmet and laid her out on a medical bed. He puffed up one of the pillows and laid the back of her head on it.

"Wait here, Haloo," he said, turning to Jelly. She looked up at him and meowed.

"What do you want, girl?" Jaycee asked, before realizing that Jelly's eyes were bleeding. Her bright orange fur had turned to a soft pink. "What's happening to your face?"

"Meeeeeee-ooooooowwww… w-oooooll…"

"Anderson? You're concerning me."

"Meow," Jelly repeated again, her voice turning huskier. "Meeeoooowwwooo-ooolll…"

"Wool?"

Jelly purred and ducked her head. Her metal claws began to flap uncontrollably like a jazzed-up pair of gloves. "Rowaarr."

Jelly flipped onto her behind and tried to fight her her paws – *with her own paws*.

"Hey, stop that," Jaycee said, walking around her. "What are you doing?"

Jelly tumbled onto her side and kicked her hind legs out, trying to fight off whatever was happening to her.

"Jaaaaaay-ceeeee…" her voice breaking into a low-pitched growl. Sparks of electricity burst out from her paws.

As Jaycee looked down, he saw a tiny bead of pink liquid fall toward his left shoe.

It splashed in slow-motion and broke apart as it collided with the ground, bleaching across the white tiles. “What’s happening to us?”

“H-Help m-me…” Haloo’s voice and body vibrated aggressively.

Jaycee wiped the bloodied patch from his cheek and raced over to Haloo. Her face had turned pink and her eyes were bleeding once again.

“What’s going on here?” Jayce asked, catching a glimpse of his own reflection in the mirrored wall. His face had gone pink, too.

Both his eyes cried pink blood.

* * *

Tripp and Bonnie headed for Opera Beta’s control deck. He cleared his throat and felt his stomach.

“I don’t feel too great,” he said, making a beeline for the control deck door.

“We’ve just swam through a vacuum and watched our sister ship detonate,” Bonnie muttered, “I think we’re entitled to feel a bit exhausted.”

“I guess you’re right. We have what we need. As soon as we find Tor, we’re turning around and heading straight for home,” Tripp snapped his fingers, expecting Manuel to appear. “Manuel?”

Snap-snap-snap. Nothing.

“Manuel?”

“What happened to Androgyne?” Bonnie wondered aloud.

“I don’t know. We need answers.”

Tripp held his glove to the panel on the door to the control deck. It opened, and they walked in.

“Ah, you made it,” Tor grinned, leaning back on the flight deck. Tripp and Bonnie clocked his Russian accent immediately. “I have to say, that was quite an impressive feat. Jumping from one ship to another.”

“Tor Klyce,” Tripp stopped a few feet away from him. “Under USARIC code fourteen-oh-three and Infinity Clause three, subsection twelve, I hereby place you under arrest for the murder of Captain Daryl J. Katz. Further, IC Two-oh-Five, disobeying a direct command for your superior officer and jeopardizing the souls aboard *both* Opera Alpha and Opera Beta.”

Tor sniggered, maniacally. “Is that so, *captain*?”

“It *is* so, Tor,” Tripp retrieved a Rez-9 firearm from his belt, hoping he wouldn’t have to use it. “You will be put into hyper-sleep under N-Carcerate jurisdiction until we reach Earth, where you will be formally charged. Do you understand this statement as I have recited

it to you?"

"Yes, I understand what you're saying," Tor chuckled, "But you don't seem to understand the bigger picture."

Bonnie became infuriated with Tor's response. "What bigger picture?"

"You stupid Americans. You're all the same. Never want to play with the others. Always wanting to take all the credit." Tor nodded behind them. "And you poison Viktor Rabinovich, our most esteemed diplomat on your soil and expect to get away with it?"

They turned around to find Baldron pointing a K-SPARK machine gun at them. "Drop the weaponry, American."

Tripp and Bonnie held up their hands.

"Hand over your firearm," Baldron said.

Tripp tossed the Rez-9 at Tor's feet. The bad guy bent down and picked it up, holding it at Tripp and Bonnie.

"It is quite simple, really," Tor took a moment to explain. "You deciphered Saturn Cry for us. You and your crew dock with Alpha and perish in the explosion. Such a shame that Baldron and I were the only ones left with that stupid cat. A Pyhrric but believable victory for us considering your nation attacked ours."

"We will take the glory," Baldron said, "We were the only survivors of Space Opera Beta's mission to Enceladus. We figured out what Saturn Cry means."

"The United States didn't attack Rabinovich."

"Yes, they did,' Baldron winked at Tor, finding it difficult to not burst out laughing. "Anyway, who cares? We are heroes."

"Like hell you are." Bonnie resisted the urge to punch them both in the face and getting herself killed. "You're nothing but scum."

"On the contrary, young American girl," Tor said, keeping his gun pointed at her face. "Show me your forearm."

"What?"

"Do it, or I will shoot you in the face."

Bonnie did as she was told. She lifted her forearm up and looked at it. "Have you gone mad?"

"If you look on your forearm, you'll find a panel."

Bonnie looked, but only found a tattoo. "What panel?"

Tor ran his finger along Bonnie's black tattoo line. It fizzed and shifted apart, creating a Rorschach-esque rectangle.

"Bonnie Whitaker," Tor said, "You're equipped with a self-destruct button. Inside where your womb would be, if you were human, is a quarter tonne of C4. If you hold down the two buttons for five seconds, it would enable a two-minute self-destruct scenario."

"No!" Bonnie pushed the man back. A wave of sheer terror thundered down her body. "No, no, it isn't true."

“Bonnie?” Tripp turned to her, keeping his arms above his head.

“Don’t move, American,” Baldron threatened Tripp and turned to Bonnie. “And *you*, don’t move, either. You useless piece of metallic junk.”

“No, no,” Bonnie punched her fists together, trying to escape the inevitable explanation. “It can’t be true.”

“North American *pig*.” Baldron smirked and spat in Bonnie’s direction. “Just a failed Androgyne upgrade like all the others.”

“It is true, I’m afraid,” Tor chuckled. “Just an obedient, useless heap of failed *Manning/Synapse* ideas. That’s all you are. Poetic, really. A waste of space.”

“What happened to Androgyne?” Bonnie spluttered and wiped her lip, wanting blood. “What did you do to her?”

“We didn’t do anything to her,” Tor said. “She did it to herself.”

“No,” Bonnie shook her head. Her entire life flashed before her eyes. “I remember everything. You’re lying.”

“I assure you I am not. And I assure you, you don’t remember a thing. Do you?”

Bonnie let out an ear-piercing scream. “I am not an android.”

“Ha. I love how you refuse to accept facts that are staring you dead in the face,” Tor nodded at the door. “Speaking of *dead*, where are Jaycee and Haloo?”

“We sent them to Botanix,” Tripp lied, briefly catching Bonnie’s gaze. “We needed to make sure it was operational before we committed to any revisions on how to proceed.”

“Good, let’s go.”

Tripp and Bonnie led the way with their hands above their heads. Tor and Baldron kept their weapons aimed at them from behind.

* * *

Wool opened her eyes. She didn’t recognize where she was at first.

The silver walls gave her a clue.

The padded bench seemed familiar.

“Where am I?” she rubbed her eyes and looked down at her foot. A metal shackle squeezed around her ankle. “What?”

She wiggled her foot, causing the metal chain to clang against the floor. Looking up, she saw the electric bars.

“What am I doing in N-Carcerate?” She stood up from the bench and made for the bars. The shackle kept her from reaching them.

Then, she remembered just how painful it would be to try to touch them. The shimmer on the glowing bars threatened to zap

anyone who was foolish enough to touch them.

She patted the side of her pants and reached into her pocket in haste. Once she found that her belongings had been removed, she panicked.

"Help, help," She shouted at the ceiling at the top of her lungs. "Someone, please. Help me. Can anyone hear me?"

In Medix, Jaycee had hooked Haloo up to a diagnostic module. She hadn't held up very well at all – half-conscious, her face had blossomed bright pink. Her eyes had stopped bleeding for the time being.

"You have a fever, Haloo," Jaycee kept an eye on the monitor. "Your body temperature is well over one hundred."

Jelly paced around, shifting her opposable metal thumbs against the floor.

Something was agitating her.

Jelly leaned back on her haunches hopped onto Haloo's bed. She flapped her tail around and trundled over to the woman's face.

"Meow," Jelly tried, pinching her wet nose around Haloo's face.

"Jelly, sweetie…" Haloo half-croaked. "What are you doing?"

The cat pressed her paws on Haloo's shoulder and leaned in for a good, deep sniff. The tip of her nose met with Haloo's.

"I'm sick, Jelly," Haloo muttered. "Stay away from m-me."

"Huh…" Jelly huffed into her face, her whiskers tingling away. "Huuuh… Loo…"

Haloo and Jaycee turned to Jelly in incredulity.

"Ha-loo…"

"Huh?" Jaycee tilted his head at the cat. "Say that again, girl?"

"Ha-loo…" Jelly's voice creaked as she tried to speak. "Ha… Loo…"

"My God," Haloo cleared her throat and lifted her hand up to Jelly's head. "She said my name…"

Haloo's chest bounced into the air unexpectedly, forcing Jelly to jump off the bed. Jaycee stepped back and allowed Haloo to overcome her spasm.

The back of her head slapped against the padded bed, pushing the blood from her eyes.

Finally, her mouth yawned open and spat out a low-pitched whine. "I-It's so *fantastic*…"

"—What is, Haloo? What's *fantastic*?" Jaycee grabbed her shoulders and bunched the fabric of her shirt in his palms. "What are you talking about?"

"Can't you see it?" She gasped, her chest deflating. The diagnostic machine ran wild. Her heart-rate and temperature rocketed up the

charts.

"No," Jaycee said, angered by his own helplessness. "What are you talking about?"

"Unngghhh…" Haloo's chest heaved once more.

Then, she flat-lined.

The dials spun down to zero. Haloo died in Jaycee's arms right there and then, her eyes looking right into his.

"No, no," Jaycee gasped, "Don't you dare die on me."

The machine let out a long beep indicating that Haloo had passed away.

Jelly rubbed her face over Jaycee's foot. He shooed her aside and made for the defibrillator that hung on the side of the machine. "Sorry, girl. Stand back."

He tore Haloo's outer-skin suit open at the chest, revealing her skin.

"Wuuuhhh," Jelly groaned, shaking her head, as if coughing up a fur ball. "Whelp."

Jayce powered up the defibrillator paddles in both hands. They whined to life and buzzed. "Clear."

He jolted Haloo with the paddles, trying to shock her to life. Each time he did, Jelly backed up, groaning in pain.

Jaycee gave up and hooked the paddles on the machine. Haloo was well and truly gone. He knew it, and so, too, did Jelly.

He let out an almighty roar of anger, startling the feline by his feet. He thumped the bed, the impact of which rocked Haloo's body back and forth.

After a deep breath, he turned to Jelly who looked up at him hoping he wouldn't take his anger out on her.

"Meow," she said, coughing up some saliva.

Jaycee turned around and grabbed his K-SPARK. He threw Jelly a look of steely determination. "Someone has to pay for this, right?"

Jelly continued to stare at him and seemed to nod in agreement. "Meow."

Jaycee made for the door and held his finger to his ear. "This is Jaycee Nayall. Can anyone read me?"

No response.

A "meow' came through his ear piece. The whiskers on Jelly's face buzzed. She could communicate with him.

"Not you, girl," Jaycee opened the door and lifted his weapon into the crook of his arm. "I repeat, can…"

"… can anyone read me?" Jaycee's voice finished through Tripp's headset as he walked along the concourse with his hands behind his head.

Bonnie could hear him, too.

Tor and Baldron chuckled to each other, having heard the request for contact. “Do not respond to him.”

“No, wait,” Baldron whispered to Tor, “Have Tripp advise him to meet them at N-Carcerate. We can execute all of them there.”

“Good thinking,” Tor said, burying the barrel of his gun between Tripp’s shoulder blades. “Get him to meet you and Bonnie at N-Carcerate. Don’t tell him that we’re here.”

“Okay, okay,” Tripp said, pacing forward.

“If you tell him we’re here, we’ll shoot you right here where you stand.”

“Fine,” Tripp pressed his finger to his ear. “Jaycee, this is Tripp reading you, over.”

“Tripp?”

“Yes, Jaycee?”

“Haloo’s dead, man,” he said, barely able to contain his anger, “Did you find Tor, yet? We need answers.”

“Dead? What do you mean dead?” Tripp asked, hoping he’d misheard Jaycee’s update.

Jaycee’s cleared his throat, “Whatever this virus is… it killed her.”

“Virus?” Tor whispered, “What is he talking about?”

Tripp chewed back the urge to emote upon hearing the news of his colleague’s death. “Jaycee, listen. Bonnie and I are en route to N-Carcerate. Can you meet us there now?”

“Yes, I’m on my way.”

“Is Jelly with you, too?”

“Yes, she’s with me.”

“Good.”

“Just as well we’re convening at N-Carcerate,” Jaycee half-joked, his thoughts steeped in venom, “I’d quite like to pick Landaker’s brains—”

“—Okay, ETA three minutes—”

“—with a large screwdriver, then crack open whatever is left of his skull open and drain the contents—”

Tripp let go of his ear and turned over his shoulder to Tor. “He doesn’t sound happy.”

“That wasn’t very nice,” Baldron kicking the small of Bonnie’s back, sending her tumbling down the corridor. “How would he like it if I said nasty things about him behind his back?”

“Silence,” Tor said, “It’ll all be over in a few minutes anyway. Keep walking.”

Wool felt a rumbling in the N-Carcerate chamber. It wasn’t the

footsteps of her visitors, however. Something grander was happening.

A series of vibrations she'd never felt before now.

She looked to her window to find it vibrating, the light from Saturn pouring through into her cell.

"What on Earth…" Her face fell when she saw what was happening to the large planet.

The wreckage from Alpha seemed to be drifting toward it. The rings around the planet slowly split out into three, separate entities. Each of them started to revolve around the planet, pushing pieces of the ship away.

"My God, it's *fantastic*," Wool whispered to herself.

CLANG.

Wool yelped and turned around to see the main door to N-Carcerate slid open. "Who's there?"

Tripp and Bonnie walked in, alone. Wool instantly spotted their strange behavior.

"Oh, thank God," Wool cried for joy, "You made it."

"Yes, we did," Tripp said, slowly. "Listen, Wool—"

"—Where are the others?"

"—No time for that right now," Bonnie said, "We're not alone."

"Look, you gotta watch out for Tor. He's a traitor," Wool shook her ankle. "Can you release me, please?"

Tor and Baldron Kept hidden behind the door to N-Carcerate, eavesdropping on the information they were sure Wool would spill.

"I knew it," Tor said, cocking his firearm. "She's told them about us."

"Why are we listening-in?" Baldron sniffed and wiped his eye. "Let's stop toying with them and kill them, already."

Tor squinted at Baldron's brow.

"What is it?"

"Your eyes are bleeding," Tor said, "Are you wearing contacts?"

"No, I'm twenty-twenty, I don't wear contacts," Baldron said, taken aback by the blob of pink blood on his finger. "My face feels really warm."

"Ugh, keep your distance," Tor said, "I don't want to catch space flu."

"I have not got space flu!" Baldron protested and nudged Tor aside. "Enough. Let's execute these infidels and get on with our mission."

"Right, everyone on your knees. Now," Baldron aimed his firearm at Tripp and Bonnie.

"Wait!" Tripp said, buying some time. "Have you seen Saturn,

lately?"

"No, and I don't care."

"Something is happening, look," Tripp nodded at the large window to his left.

Baldron and Tor looked to their right at the window. Their jaws dropped in wonder. "Oh, wow…"

Saturn's rings were in full rotation. The planet seemed to bulge like a beating heart as the rings revolved around at speed. The inertia coming from the spectacle rocked Opera Beta.

"When we boarded Alpha, we were told something was going to happen," Tripp explained.

"The mission isn't over," Bonnie added, "It's only just begun."

"What is that?" Tor pointed at Saturn and grew anxious. "Why are the rings doing that?"

"I don't know," Tripp spat, doing his best to make his assailants change their minds about executing them. "But we need to stick around to find out."

"Correction, American," Tor snapped, "*We*, my comrade and I, need to stick around to find out. Not you."

Bonnie spotted something coming from the corridor. She clenched her fists behind her head and slowly rose to her feet. "Are you going to sabotage what could be the greatest discovery of the universe by killing us?"

"Yes," Tor said without a hint of remorse. He swung his gun at her face. "I am going to blast your pretty little head off."

"It's ironic you said that," Bonnie smirked, evilly.

Tor didn't get the joke. "How is what I just said ironic—"

BLAM.

A bullet rocketed past his head from behind, scraping a few strands of his hair from the side of his face. Tor jumped forward and slid across the floor, releasing his weapon.

Tripp wasted no time in collecting the gun and pointing it at Tor.

Jaycee stormed forward and swung his K-SPARK gun at Baldron. The terrified Russian reached into his inner-suit and pulled out a red dumb bomb.

"No, no, no," Baldron threatened to yank the pin away from the bomb. He sidestepped toward the exit to the chamber. "You want us all to die?"

"No," Jaycee fumed, ready to kill the man, "Just you."

"What was that you said to me, Jaycee? Never point your gun at the people you work with?"

"You don't work with us."

"Hypocrite." Baldron tugged on the chain, almost releasing it.

"Jesus," Tripp said, keeping the Rez-9 pointed at Tor's head.

“Jaycee, don’t exacerbate the situation. Stand down.”

Jaycee lowered the gun, angry with himself. “Fine.”

“You like surrendering, don’t you, American? Your history is full of failed war stories,” Baldron chuckled to himself. “Tor, are you coming?”

“I would,” he said, looking at the barrel of his own gun pointing at him from Tripp’s hand. “But, uh, he’s got my gun.”

“Give my comrade his weapon back, Mr Healy,” Baldron tugged at the pin on the dumb bomb. “If I pull the pin, there’s no going back. We will all get a first row view of whatever is happening out there.”

“You wouldn’t blow us up,” Tripp threw the gun at Tor, who caught it clumsily in his hands. “There’s too much at stake.”

“On the contrary, American *scum*,” Baldron wrenched the pin away from the grenade, setting off its sixty second timer. “I just did.”

“Oh, God,” everyone screamed, “No!”

“Tor, run!” Baldron darted out of the chamber. Tor jumped after him.

“No, wait!” Jaycee turned around and chased after them. Tripp fired two rounds in their direction and missed.

Tor and Baldron jumped through the door and closed it shut.

“Goodbye, scumbags,” Baldron tossed the dumb bomb through the gap in the door and slammed it shut.

The grenade bounced off Jaycee’s shoulder and rolled across the ground.

Tripp, Bonnie and Wool stepped back as the digital readout counted down from forty seconds…

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bonnie pushed herself to the floor in a frantic scramble to grab the dumb bomb as it rolled toward the cells.

She opened her hand and grabbed the device in her hand. “Thirty-five seconds! What do we do?”

“We can’t shut it off,” Wool cried out loud and closed her eyes.

“Stand back,” Jaycee lifted his K-SPARK shot gun and aimed it at the door. “Keep your heads down.”

BLAMMM!

He fire a bullet into the door, blasting it off its hinges, triggering Opera Beta’s internal alarm. He booted the remains of the door away. “Everyone out.”

“I’m stuck,” Wool lifted her shackled ankle. “They have the key. I can’t move.”

“Wool,” Bonnie looked at the timer on the grenade. “Thirty seconds…”

Tor and Baldron rang along the gantry at speed, heading toward Botanix.

“What did you do that for?” Tor asked. “The bomb will blow a hole in the side of the ship.

“No,” Baldron ran ahead of Tor. “N-Carcerate will contain the explosion. We did it. We won. A unanimous Stateside suicide pact.”

As the pair’s footsteps clanged along the corridor ground, their feet became lighter. Eventually, their toes drifted away from the floor.

The gravity subsided, sending them into a free-float in the middle of the corridor.

“What’s happening?”

“Someone’s hit the gravity switch!” Baldron gasped, and looked at Botanix.

The door slid open, releasing Jelly. She kicked her hind legs off the frame and propelled forward, claws outstretched.

“Toooorrrr…” she shrieked, flying towards him.

“Anderson?” he screamed and covered his face. “What are you doing?”

Jelly swiped her metal claws, tearing the skin in three sections down the side of his face.

“Gaah!”

Tor kicked Jelly away, sending her tumbling through the gravity-less air. He swung his gun in her direction and squeezed the trigger.

“You dumb rodent.”

Bang.

The bullet exploded in the chamber. Tor expected it to fly out of the barrel, but in zero gravity, he'd managed to blow his hand apart in a haze of fire and shrapnel.

Tor screamed and held his damaged hand up. "Kill it."

Baldron pushed himself against the wall and kicked his feet to the ceiling. He looked back to N-Carcerate to see that door was open. "Oh no…"

Bonnie floated into the air with the grenade in her hand. "What do we do?"

"If it goes off here, we're dead. Sucked out into space if the detonator doesn't kill us first."

Jaycee released his K-SPARK shotgun. Instead of hitting the ground, it simply floated away from his palm. "Gimme the bomb."

"What are you going to do?" Tripp asked, pushing himself into Wool's cell and grabbing her shoulders.

"Something I should have done the instant I met them."

Bonnie pinged the grenade toward Jaycee.

"If I throw it hard enough, Botanix might contain the blast." He caught the grenade and pulled his arm back. "Duck."

Tripp hugged Wool, who clung to him for dear life. "What the—no!"

Jaycee hurled the grenade down the corridor with all his might.

The bomb hurtled down the central passage, headed for Tor and Baldron – and Jelly.

Jelly knew instinctively what was happening. She pushed her hind legs off the ground and bolted behind the grenade.

Her claws latched onto the flying bomb and carried her toward Botanix's open door.

She pressed her knees to her stomach and planted the soles of her hind feet on the dumb bomb.

"What's she doing?" Tor held his breath and grabbed onto Baldron's arms.

"I don't know."

Jelly kicked the dumb bomb forward, pushing it faster along the weightless corridor.

As she kicked away, she somersaulted, legs-over-head and caught the Botanix door frame. The lower-half of her body swung sideways into the room.

She pulled herself through the door and placed her infinity claws against the plate on the wall.

The door slammed shut on the tip of her tail. "Meeeoooowwww!"

"That is *one* smart animal," Baldron couldn't believe his eyes.

“She’s stuck,” Tor said.

Jelly floated away from the door like a sideways pendulum, trying to “swim’ from the door. Her tail was stuck.

“Anderson?” Tor finally re-evaluated his position in life. Floating before him was a cat smart enough to save the crew from death – at the expense of oxygen.

Baldron swallowed hard. A blob of pink blood drifted away, slowly, from his cheek. “Look at her, she knows what’s happening.”

Jelly swung her metal claws at the pair. “Toooooorrrrrr…” As she tried to speak, clumps of fur drifted from her face, molting into the corridor.

A sliver of blood streaked through the air from her eye sockets. “Toooorrrr—”

KA-BOOM!

Botanix exploded like a self-contained thunderclap in a teacup. The sound of the explosion muffled, sparking against the window.

The plants caught ablaze and shattered. The heat lamps burst into pieces, sending jolts of electricity around the room.

The door shimmed enough to release Jelly’s tail. The tip separated from her body, releasing her into the corridor.

Baldron and Tor turned to face N-Carcerate. “Oh, dear.”

Bonnie grabbed a latch on the corridor wall and propelled herself toward Tor. “Remember? No Russian?”

Baldron went to strike her with his fist. “Yes, I remember.”

“Yeah, let’s stick to that. Stick *this*.”

Bonnie swung her body around and kicked Baldron in the face. He tumbled back in the air and grabbed a latch on the corridor wall. He booted himself forward and punched Bonnie across the face.

A string of blood flew from her lips and traveled toward N-Carcerate.

“You think you can win, you dumb Yank?” Baldron grabbed her by the back of her hair and snarled in her face. She clasped his fist with both hands and stared him down.

“Yeah, I think I can win.”

Baldron spat in her face. “Repeat after me. I am a dumb robot.”

“Ugghhh,” Bonnie closed her eyes and spat his saliva away from her mouth.

“I am not a robot,” Bonnie growled. “My name is Dr. Whitaker. I am a human being, and I remember *everything*.”

She yanked his fist away from her head, taking the bunch of hair with it.

Bonnie leaned back and head-butted Baldron on the nose, busting the cartilage within. His face turned a bright pink. The blood on her

eyes could have been his, or hers, but she didn't care.

Baldron held his face in his hands, groaning in pain.

Everyone watched as Bonnie accosted the bad guy.

"On behalf of USARIC," she said, grabbed his inner-suit collar, holding him up for the last time. "Consider this a *dishonorable* discharge."

She planted her titanium foot on his chest and kicked through his breastplate. His body screamed back against the door to Botanix, narrowly missing Jelly.

Baldron floated, twisting and turning in pain. He coughed up a torrent of blood toward the ground.

Tor kept his hands behind his head and looked at Bonnie, terrified. She looked at him and wiped the blood from her eyes. "You want some, as well?"

"No, no," Tor pleaded, keeping an eye on Tripp as he approached him. "I surrender."

Bonnie drifted out of consciousness and lilted in the air, her flowing black locks drifted behind her shoulders. "Something… *fantastic* is… about to happen…"

Tripp pushed his way over to Tor and sealed the zip tie around his wrists. "Tor Klyce, if that's even your real name—"

"—It is not."

"—Well, whoever you are, you are under arrest," Tripp said, "I would ask you to hand over your cyanide capsule, please."

"My right inner thigh."

Tripp pushed him towards N-Carcerate. He spun around and drifted toward the cell doors. Tripp reached into Tor's inner thigh pocket and took out the capsule.

"Thank you very much."

Tripp shackled the man by his ankle to the cell bed. Wool drifted back and breathed a sigh of relief.

Jaycee kicked himself along the corridor, flying toward N-Carcerate, with the unconscious Baldron in his arms.

Tor was upset. His comrade had been defeated and so, too, had their plans. A pink blob of water fell away from his tear duct. "Why… why is everyone crying pink?"

"I don't know, Tor," Tripp said, taking Baldron's weightless body from Jaycee's arms. "Blood is usually red. Perhaps it's a lukewarm communist statement? Who knows."

"Why does my face feel like it's on fire?" Tor cried. "What's happening?"

"Shut up, *Russian*," Jaycee threatened to punch Tor's lights out.

"Now, now, Jaycee," Tripp said, "There's no need for rudeness."

Jaycee clamped his giant glove around Tor's neck. "He's responsible for this. If it wasn't for him, Captain Katz would be alive. Haloo would be alive. We might not have gotten sick."

"That's not true," Tor said, the grip on his neck making him feel sleepy. "We didn't mean to kill anyone—"

Thwump.

Jaycee punched Tor's lights out. "That's for Wool."

The man fell asleep in Tripp's arms and began to snore. He flung Tor to the bed and turned around. "I've had enough of that idiot."

"Sounds good," Tripp shackled Baldron's ankle to the unconscious Tor. He took a step back with Bonnie and admired the view. "Look at them."

"Yeah. So pretty together…"

Jelly propelled herself into Wool's arms. They were both very happy to see each other.

"Jelly, come here, honey."

"Meowwwwwww-oool…"

"What's that?" Wool was taken aback. She took out a penlight and flashed it in Jelly's eyes. "Let me see you, sweetie."

Jelly yawned and dug her titanium claws in Wool's suit.

"Oh, you poor thing," Wool said, inspecting the tip of her tail. "You must be in so much pain."

"What's wrong, Wool?" Tripp asked. "Her tail?"

"Look."

She inspected Jelly's tail. The end was bleeding. A lot of the fur was missing. "I think the bone is fractured."

"She's bleeding from the eye, as well," Tripp said, his eyelids beginning to lower. Jaycee had fallen asleep like a huge, revolving boulder in the corridor. "I, I… need to get back to control and update USARIC."

"I'll take Jelly back to Medix and make sure she's okay."

"Very good," Tripp said, kicking himself toward the door.

Opera Beta Control Deck

Tripp pulled himself into the room and snapped his fingers in the air. "Manuel…" he gasped, breathlessly, "Do you read me?"

The holographic book appeared above the flight deck. "Yes, Tripp. May I ask what happened?"

"Tor Klyce disabled you just before we boarded Alpha."

"Why did he do that?"

"He's working for the Russians. He and Baldron Landaker. The

latter is now deceased."

"Am I to understand that Captain Katz and Haloo Ess are also no longer with us?"

"Yes," Tripp said, smearing the blood from his face and sitting into the flight chair. "I need you to generate a report on Botanix's current operational output."

"Yes, give me a moment."

Manuel "paused' in mid-air. Tripp hit a button on the terminal.

The screen sprang to life, showing Tripp's bloodied, worn out face on the recording in real time.

"I look like hell," he whispered to himself. "Commence recording. USARIC, Cape Claudius. Date imprint, run-time display. Second-in-command, Commander Tripp Healy. Record."

A red record button flashed in the corner of the screen. Tripp looked at the screen and took a moment to run through what he wanted to say.

"This is Tripp Healy, assumed captain of Space Opera Beta. We have lost her captain, Daryl Katz…."

Saturn's rings revolved at speed around the planet. The blue surface glowed and breathed in and out.

"Shortly before boarding Space Opera Alpha, we deciphered enough of Saturn Cry to ascertain that it was, indeed, sending a distress call. Baldron Landaker and Tor Klyce are in incarceration. Dimitri Vasilov, I hope you can hear this. Maar, I hope you're with him. This has been a deliberate sabotage of our mission. I hope USARIC finds the powers it has to rectify the situation."

A pink gas tore out from the dark side of Enceladus and blossomed out.

"Haloo Ess confirmed deceased at time of recording. Can confirm that Zillah Chin-Dunne was on board Opera Alpha, although her crew were dead. She speculated that something to do with Saturn was about to happen. I can't recall her exact phrase, but it was going to be something *spectacular*."

The pink tear on Enceladus's dark side glowed and shimmer, bleaching out across the darkness.

"Alpha was destroyed. Most of us made it back, but we seem to have contracted some sort of virus. The same extends to J Anderson, as well. Botanix has been compromised. I am waiting on Manuel to report back on the severity of the damage. I do not expect it to be positive."

A holy pink light burst from the dark side of Enceladus. Saturn's rings sped up, as if it were responsible for the moon's cry into the infinite vacuum of space.

It caught Tripp's waning attention. He looked over at the deck and saw the light show in all its magnificence.

"Oh m-my," he stammered, "Look at it. It's *beautiful*…"

The recording continued, showing half of Tripp's head on screen. It didn't reveal just how in awe he was of what he saw.

Manuel's holograph appeared above the screen. "I have the results from Botanix, Tripp."

"Wait a moment, Manuel," Tripp kept his awe-struck gaze on the light show occurring in space. He turned the screen to face the pink matter wading out of Enceladus.

"Can you see that on the screen?" Tripp's voice came over the recording. "Enceladus. Saturn's sixth largest planet. We always knew *something* was happening. We're hearing it's a wormhole. We think Alpha may have been through it."

Tripp blinked and shook himself out of his mire. He angled the screen back to him as he returned to his chair. "Report, please, Manuel."

"Botanix is at critical levels of operation. Eight-five percent damage."

Tripp sighed, no longer wanting to fight to stay awake. "I feel like I'm burning up."

"I can attempt a shut-off and rejuvenate on Botanix's core functionality, if you would like?" Manuel offered.

"Just tell me how much air we have left, Manuel," Tripp said, burying his face into his arms on the desk.

"Approximately seventy-two hours, Tripp."

He lifted his head to the screen, bleeding from the eyes. "Three days? That's it, I'm afraid. No one will survive. We'll be long dead before you send Opera Charlie, if you ever do," Tripp nodded at Enceladus's pink beauty. "Anyway, there's your answer, USARIC. Saturn and Enceladus partying up. Something called Pink Symphony. Whatever that means. This is captain Tripp Healy… signing off…"

Tripp slumped into his arms.

Manuel floated around, flapping his pages. "Hmm. Stop recording, please."

The recording stopped.

"Transmit visual message to USARIC."

The screen produced a loading bar, advising a send-time of five minutes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Wool strapped a piece of gauze around the end of Jelly's tail. She clipped the end off with a razor and pressed the ends together.

"You're very lucky, Jelly. Your injury could have been much worse." Wool coughed into her palm and stroked Jelly with her free hand. "I don't know if you know what's going on. How could you possibly know? Manuel says Botanix has enough oxygen for three days, sweetie. We're going to die up here. There's no way out."

"Meow," Jelly sniffed around her face and seemed to smile at the woman.

"You initiated zero gravity," Wool said. "How did you do—"

"Zeeeh… roooooow… graaaaa…" Jelly tried.

"Something happened to the crew, Jelly. To you, too. Look," Wool wiped the top of her own cheek. A streak of pink blood nestled across her knuckle. "I don't understand why I'm sick. I never boarded Alpha. Whatever it is, they must have brought it back with them."

Wool cleared her throat and took a black capsule from her inner-suit pants.

"Take this. It'll make everything okay."

She pushed the capsule toward Jelly's mouth, but the cat refused to take it in her mouth. "N-No…"

"Come on, Jelly," Wool said, hesitantly, "It will help. You trust me, don't you?"

Jelly tilted her head and looked at Wool. She ran her face along the side of Wool's hand.

"Look, it's okay, sweetie," Wool produced a black capsule and mimed opening her own mouth. "I'm taking one, too. We'll both go to sleep and there won't be any pain, I promise."

It was enough to convince Jelly. She opened her mouth with great obedience and allowed her friend to drop the cyanide capsule in.

"Good girl," Wool smiled and ran her hands down the sides of Jelly's face.

Little did she know that Jelly flicked Wool's capsule off the table with her hind leg.

"Look at you, you beautiful thing," she said, nearly bursting into tears. "You don't belong up here. You never did. USARIC made a mistake involving you."

Jelly purred, enjoying the rub-down she was receiving. She ran her face along Wool's cheek.

"I love you too, Jelly," Wool kept the cat's head in her hands. "Any moment now, sweetie. We'll both be at peace."

Jelly licked her cheek, catching a droplet of blood from her eye

duct.

"I feel so sleepy," Wool said, "It must be a lack of oxygen, or something. And I'm so warm."

"W-Wooooll…" Jelly's voice rumbled. "W-Wooooll…"

"Jelly?" The woman raised her eyes in shock. "Honey, you can speak?"

"Wooooo-oooll…."

"Yes," she gasped, trying to fight her drift toward unconsciousness. "That's my name."

"Woooo-oooll…"

"Yes, yes," Wool released Jelly's head from her palms. She sat back in her chair and tucked her chin to her neck. "My name is Wool ar-Ban. You… are Jelly Anderson…"

Jelly shifted her head and watched as her friend fell asleep in her chair.

She hopped off the table and scurried along the ground, heading for the Medix door. Wool lay across the bed with her arms and started to snore.

Out in the corridor, Jelly stopped at a metal grille in the ground. She opened her mouth and poked her tongue around her gums.

The tip of her tongue lifted the wet capsule over her teeth. The small bit of plastic tumbled over her chin and dropped to the ground.

Jelly snarled at it and pushed it toward the grille. It fell through the tiny bars and dropped down, to be lost forever.

"Meow," Jelly licked her paw, careful not to catch her tongue on the titanium. Satisfied that she was free from danger, she trundled towards the control deck…

* * *

Tripp lay unconscious over the flight panel.

Jelly trundled in and surveyed the surroundings. She was the only soul on board the Opera Beta who was awake, and she knew it.

A huge playground of fun and opportunity surrounded her – alas, not for very long.

She knew that, too. There was work to be done.

Jelly approached the second chair at the flight deck and hopped onto the seat.

The main screen loomed in front of her, obscuring the view of Enceladus emitting a pink symphony of light into the stars.

The image reflected in her glazed eyeballs. She stared up at the spectacle in wonder for a brief moment and licked her mouth.

“Meow,” Jelly ducked her head, trying not to look at the stars. Her internal engine kicked to life, purring up a storm. She moved over to Tripp’s hand and ran the side of her face against his forefinger.

She turned to the screen and held out her paw. Two of her metal claws snapped together, creating a spark.

Manuel’s holograph appeared.

“Ah, Miss Anderson,” Manuel said, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Meow.”

“Everyone appears to be asleep. The result of some nasty virus picked up on Opera Alpha, apparently.”

“Meow,” Jelly clawed at the keyboard under the screen.

“What’s that, Miss Anderson?” The book floated around her ears. “You want to access the N-Gage mainframe?”

“Muuuh...”

“Very well.” Manuel shuffled down to the keyboard hovered above the N-Gage communications panel. “N-Gage ready. Simply press the green communication button and tell me who you’d like to speak to.”

Jelly whined, looking around the keyboard. She extended her paw and punched the green communication button.

A message flashed on the screen. “Enter respondent ID now.”

Jelly tried to catch the flashing text with her claws. Her lungs heaved and let out a series of coughs. “Muuuh…”

“Who would you like to speak too?”

Jelly lowered her head and looked around the keyboard. She flapped her tail around and whined.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Miss Anderson,” Manuel chuckled to himself. “I’m an advanced system. I can do it for you. I just need the name of the person you’d like to speak to.”

Jelly looked up at the floating book. A trickle of blood blobbed out from her eye duct. “Jaayy… Jaaay…”

“Jaycee Nayall?” Manuel asked, “I’m afraid he’s incommunicado —”

“Meow!” Jelly shook the beads of blood away from her face and growled. “Jaaaaa-aaaayy… Meeeeeoowww…”

“Jaymeow?” Manuel scanned his internal memory banks. “I’m afraid we have no such person—”

“—Jaaayyy… Meeee…” Jelly tried, quietly, in between heaves. Finally, she looked down at her inner-skin suit and clocked her name.

She pressed her claw against her surname: *Anderson*.

“Oh, *Jamie* Anderson?” Manuel said, “Honestly, why didn’t you just say that? Accessing N-Gage contacts. Dialing for you now.”

Jelly shook her head and licked her paw.

The screen dialed for a while.

Jelly looked up at it, but all she saw was her only reflection. “Meow.”

Her eyes bled a pink substance. Jelly’s instinct was to rescue the poor cat on the other side of the screen.

As she held out her paw, an image snapped onto the screen that took Jelly by surprise.

Jamie Anderson, her owner.

Only, a year older and just as tired as Jelly.

“Hello?” Jamie said, poking his nose around the lens of his device. “Hang on a minute.”

Jelly’s face lit up – both figuratively and literally. The glare from the screen only exposed the contrast between her pink hue and blood mark.

Jamie recognized who was calling and could barely contain his excitement.

“Oh, wow. Jelly!”

“Meow,” she said, pressing her paw on his face. “Maaah.”

Jamie turned around and beckoned someone over. “Mom, come and see this. Look, look.”

“What is it, poppet?”

“It’s Jelly,” Jamie beamed.

Emily walked into shot, carrying a baby in her arms.

Jelly scrunched her face, wondering who this new human being was. “Meow.”

“Is that her?” Emily smiled and waved at the camera. “Hey, Jelly. Wow, is that really you?”

Jelly purred quietly to herself. Her paw slid down the screen, away from Jamie’s face. “Mmmm.” She let out a huff and turned to Jamie’s face on the screen.

“Well done, poppet,” Emily smiled and walked out of shot. “It’s been such a long time, I’d almost forgotten…”

Jamie turned to the camera and leaned in. “That was Jolene, your new baby sister.”

Jelly was impressed. She looked down at her paw and moved her claws back and forth. The tiny fizzles of mechanical whirs were almost deafening.

“I didn’t forget about you, Jelly,” Jamie began to cry. “I miss you. Not a day goes by when I don’t think of you.”

Jelly looked up at the screen and purred. She seemed to produce a smile. “Jaaaay…. Meeee…”

“Wow, you said my name,” Jamie called over his shoulder. “Mom, she can talk.”

“Very good, poppet. Can you come into the kitchen and help me, please.”

“Yeah, in a minute,” Jamie turned to the screen and looked at Jelly. “You look sick, Jelly. Is everything okay?”

She held up her infinity claws and moved the cuticles around.

“Oh, *wow*,” he asked, confused. “What did they do to you?”

Jelly whined and flipped her bandaged tail around. She felt her eyelids get heavier.

“I can’t wait to see you again, Jelly. When are you coming home?”

“Grrr…” Jelly fought the urge to fall asleep. She wasn’t impressed with her owner’s behavior, either. She looked up at the screen and blinked as hard as she could.

“Jelly, what’s wrong?” Jamie asked, somewhat concerned.

She held up her paw and tilted it from side to side. Jamie’s mood soured. He did the same.

They waved goodbye for the final time.

Suddenly, Jamie had a change of heart. “Hey, wait—”

Jelly’s paw hit the green button, intending to cut the call. Instead, it flashed onto the next event.

An incoming visual message from USARIC.

“Would you like me to play the message, Miss Anderson?”

“Meow,” she whined and curled up beside Tripp’s free hand on the deck.

“Very well, playing message,” Manuel said. “One minute, twenty seconds.”

Maar Sheck’s image appeared on the screen. He stood in front of a podium and a bunch of microphones, addressing a hoard of news reporters.

“Thank you for attending this emergency press conference, everybody. I will try to keep this brief…”

Jelly’s eyelids closed, squeezing a couple of drops of red tears from her eyes.

“USARIC received a visual communication from Space Opera Beta a little under one hour ago. We can confirm that the vessel reached its intended destination, Enceladus, slightly ahead of schedule. We can also confirm that the nature of its distress call, in accordance with USARIC’s Infinity Clause, was deciphered with success by the gifted and talented scientists on board Beta…”

Jelly opened her eyes and took one final look at the symphony of pink light emitting from Enceladus. “Meow…”

“We regret to inform our friends, however, that the mission was sabotaged by a direct contravention the Bering Treaty and USARIC’s

own Infinity Clause. Due diligence has been disregarded. Two crew members, under the command of Dimitri Vasilov, have been detained. Our last communication indicated that Opera Beta's oxygen levels were running well below the requirements needed to get home."

Jelly's ears pricked up. They were unable to go home. "Meow."

Maar continued reading from his statement. "As of this moment, USARIC will cease operation. Following the death of Viktor Rabinovich and, now, the sabotage perpetrated by our Russian allies. All diplomatic relations have been suspended with immediate effect. It is with regret that all Russian operatives are to be ejected from American soil, and vice versa. We send our thoughts and prayers to the souls aboard Opera Beta and wish them all the best on their survival in the vicinity of Enceladus. Beta, may God be with you."

The media kicked up a frenzy. Dreenagh Remix pushed through the crowd and held her wrist to Maar's face as he walked away from the hubbub. "Mr Sheck, can you confirm that USARIC is preparing Space Opera Charlie to recover what's left from the first two missions?"

"I'm very sorry," Maar said, stepping away from the podium. "No questions at this time."

The message came to an end.

"Miss Anderson," Manuel asked, politely, "Would you like me to replay the message?"

Jelly climbed onto her feet once again, shaking her head. Determined, she made her way over to Tripp's head and looked at his right hand.

A few inches away lay the hyper-thruster lever.

"Miss Anderson, what are you doing?"

"Peee… Pee…" she growled, almost losing her ability to keep upright. "Sim… fonee…"

"Miss Anderson?" Manuel asked, "Listen, you may be the current in-command operative aboard Opera Beta, but you can't seriously be suggesting we—"

Jelly ignored Manuel despite his attempt to distract her.

A page containing a big, fat mouse didn't work.

He flipped to another page, displaying a bright and colorful set of jangling keys.

"Miss Anderson, please—"

"—Grrrr," she growled, lifted her right paw and placed it on the hyper-thruster lever. "Pink. Symphony…"

She pushed the lever forward, but wasn't strong enough.

"Miss Anderson, I ask you to reconsider. I realize we only have three days' worth of oxygen left, but—"

“Piii-iiink…” Jelly coughed, her voice croaked, more human-sounding. “Symphony…”

With two paws on the lever. She pushed forward. It shifted a bit, but not enough.

“We do not know what is in there, Miss Anderson. It’s very dangerous.”

The roar of pink fire from Enceladus blotted out across her eyeballs. It was enough of a last-push for her to force her entire weight onto the lever.

It was either journey into the great unknown, or stay and die.

Jelly gripped the lever in her Infinity Claws and slammed it forward.

“Hyper-thrusters initiated.”

The core of the ship rumbled to life. The array of hyper thrusters lit up, almost brighter than the sun.

Opera Beta shot off, plummeting toward Enceladus.

Jelly hooked her paws around the lever. Her hind legs lifted off the console and flew into the air.

“Meeeoooowww,” she cried as the swirling cacophony of pink streaks blasted across the ship’s screen.

Space Opera Beta shot into the fantastic symphony of pink light emitting from Enceladus…

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Acknowledgements:

For K

Also to:

My immediate family.

The CVB Gang Members / ARC Street Team.

Jolene Huber, the real captain of the ship.

Jennifer Long, the "Bonnie" of stalkers.

Adele Embrey, the "Androgyne" of proofing.

The members and admins of 20BooksTo50K.

Extra special thanks to authors Michael Anderle, Craig Martelle, Jonathan Brazee, Justin Sloan, Martha Carr, Charley R. Case, Amy Duboff, Sarah Noffke, Dominque Mondesir, and JN Chaney.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Mandy Reed. She passed away five days before this book's release.

A devoted mother, an exceptional wit and a loyal and voracious ARC reader.

A "star cat" in every sense and one of my first champions.

I will miss you.

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Edited by Ashley Rose Miller
Cover design by Kveather

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